

**MONROVIA UNION CEMETERY, CHARLESTON  
COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA**



# **MONROVIA UNION CEMETERY, CHARLESTON COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA**

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## **Chicora Research Contribution 339**

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## ABSTRACT

The Monrovia Union Cemetery, often called just Monrovia Cemetery, is an African American cemetery situated west of I-26, off Oceanic Street and just south of Braswell Street in North Charleston. The property to the north will shortly be undergoing remediation for heavy metal contamination — the result of years of industrial activity.

As a result, this brief historical study was conducted to learn more about the formation of the cemetery, its activities on the site, and the land-use history of the property. The goal is to determine the potential for human burials intruding into the adjacent industrial tract and provide guidance should human remains be identified during the remediation work.

The investigations found that the cemetery property was acquired in 1872 by James D. Price, John M. Reed, Charles Bryan, Thomas R. Small, and William Thomas, presumably the first trustees of the Monrovia Union Cemetery Company. Although no papers of incorporation have been found, we assume that the cemetery company was either a for-profit or beneficial company. We have not been able to determine if the company is still in operation, although the grounds are cared for and there are very recent interments in the cemetery.

The property today consists of ca. 3.7 acres of high ground. Burials are clearly marked primarily on the western half. The rolling topography of the eastern section, however, suggests that unmarked burials are present. There is a loop road, with access off Oceanic Street. A container situated at the southern edge of the cemetery contains funeral service materials. A ditch separates the cemetery from industrial property to the north and marsh to the west. A chain link fence surrounds the tract.

The topography is generally level, although there is a sizable mound on the northern edge of the property. This mound is clearly artificial, consisting of alternating lenses of dark

and light soil about 3 to 4 feet in height. The fill is generally clean and appears to have been brought into the site to allow above grade burials.

This investigation failed to identify any conclusive evidence that the area north of the ditch has ever been incorporated into the cemetery or was used as cemetery. The ditch was not originally a boundary line, although it is a historical feature and, in 1872, was used as a boundary line. This ditch may also have originally extended further to the east than at present.

Nevertheless, we recommend caution in any land disturbing activities affecting the ditch (whether cut or fill activities are involved). The discovery of any bones, coffin parts (wood or metal) or coffin hardware (for example, handles), should result in all ground disturbing activities to come to a halt.

Under South Carolina law, the Charleston County Coroner should be immediately notified of the find. Pending their determination that the find is not forensic, the State Archaeologist's Office (who has jurisdiction over all non-forensic human remains) should then be notified. Chicora Foundation can initially verify finds and coordinate the notification process, if desired.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	iv
Introduction	1
Historic Synthesis	5
Current Condition	13
Recommendations	17

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	
1. Project vicinity in the Charleston Neck area	2
2. Monrovia Union Cemetery and adjacent industrial tracts	3
3. Plat of the Monrovia Union Cemetery	6
4. Portion of the ca. 1864 <i>Map of the Defences of Charleston</i> showing the vicinity	7
5. Ashepoo Fertilizer Company showing Monrovia Union Cemetery	8
6. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 1884 showing the Ashepoo Fertilizer Company	9
7. Portion of the 1919 USGS Charleston topographic map showing the cemetery	10
8. Portion of the 1943 USGS Charleston topographic map showing the cemetery	10
9. 1949 aerial photograph of the cemetery area	11
10. 1967 aerial photograph of the cemetery area	11
11. Sign for Monrovia Cemetery	13
12. View of the cemetery from the entrance looking west	13
13. View of the rise in the northwestern quadrant of the cemetery	14
14. Lensed soil of the rise exposed in a recently opened grave shaft	15



## INTRODUCTION

This investigation was conducted by Dr. Michael Trinkley of Chicora Foundation, Inc. for Mr. John F. Greiner of Conco and Ms. Christina C. Staib, PE of URS Diamond. The work was conducted to assist these firms better understand the potential for encountering human remains on adjacent property, as well as their responsibility should human remains be encountered.

The study tract consists of what is locally known as the Monrovia Cemetery, which encompasses 3.7 acres of land situated on the Charleston Neck, within the City of Charleston (see Figure 1). The cemetery is today bounded to the north by a parcel owned by Resco Tower Co. and a subdivided tract owned by Industrial Neck Partnership. To the northwest is a tract owned by Kenan Transport Co., while to the west is a parcel owned by Beazer East, Inc. All of these parcels are industrial in nature, but are separated from the cemetery by a ditch and chain link fence. Access to the cemetery is by way of Oceanic Street, a frontage road west of I-26. The industrial parcels are all accessed by Braswell Street, which runs off Meeting Street to the east (Figure 2).

Historically the industrial property to the north was occupied by the Ashepoo Fertilizer Company (also known as the Ashepoo Phosphate Company, and later American Agricultural Chemical Company), which converted phosphate rock to commercial fertilizer. By the mid-twentieth century the phosphate industry had collapsed, but the parcel was still heavily industrialized.

Trustees of the Monrovia Union Cemetery Company purchased the tract to the south prior to any industrial development and created an African American cemetery in 1872. Successive trustees sold off portions of the cemetery to various interests, so that today only a small portion of the original tract remains. Burials, however, likely date from the last quarter of the nineteenth century through 2001.

Remediation of heavy metals in the soils

of some nearby tracts will be undertaken in the near future. This work will involve removal and disposal of contaminated soil from the industrial area, as well as from the ditch which separates the cemetery from those tracts. In addition, there may be some areas where soil will be added, rather than cut.

This study was undertaken to evaluate the potential for these activities to encounter human remains. One of the most critical questions, of course, is whether burials are known to have taken place off the cemetery property (or if the boundaries of that property have substantively changed through time). Equally important is the issue of the ditch and how much it may have moved through time.

This investigation provides a brief historical synopsis, based on limited investigations undertaken at the Charleston County Register of Mesne Conveyances, the Charleston City Archives, and the South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Inquiries were also made with the Charleston County Preservation Planning Office, as well as with Ms. Alida S. Small, a local African American researcher. An effort was also made to contact individuals currently involved in the cemetery, based on three phone numbers listed on the cemetery's sign on Oceanic Street. The individual at one number today knows nothing of the cemetery, one number didn't answer, and the third number is for the William Smith McNeill Funeral Home in Charleston.

There are additional lines of historical research, including newspaper vertical files, city directories, and oral histories, which are beyond the scope of the current work and which have not been explored.

In addition, while we did conduct a brief walk-over of the cemetery, no intensive field investigation was conducted. The ditch itself is heavily cluttered with cemetery debris, including flower arrangements, floral stands, grass

# MONROVIA UNION CEMETERY

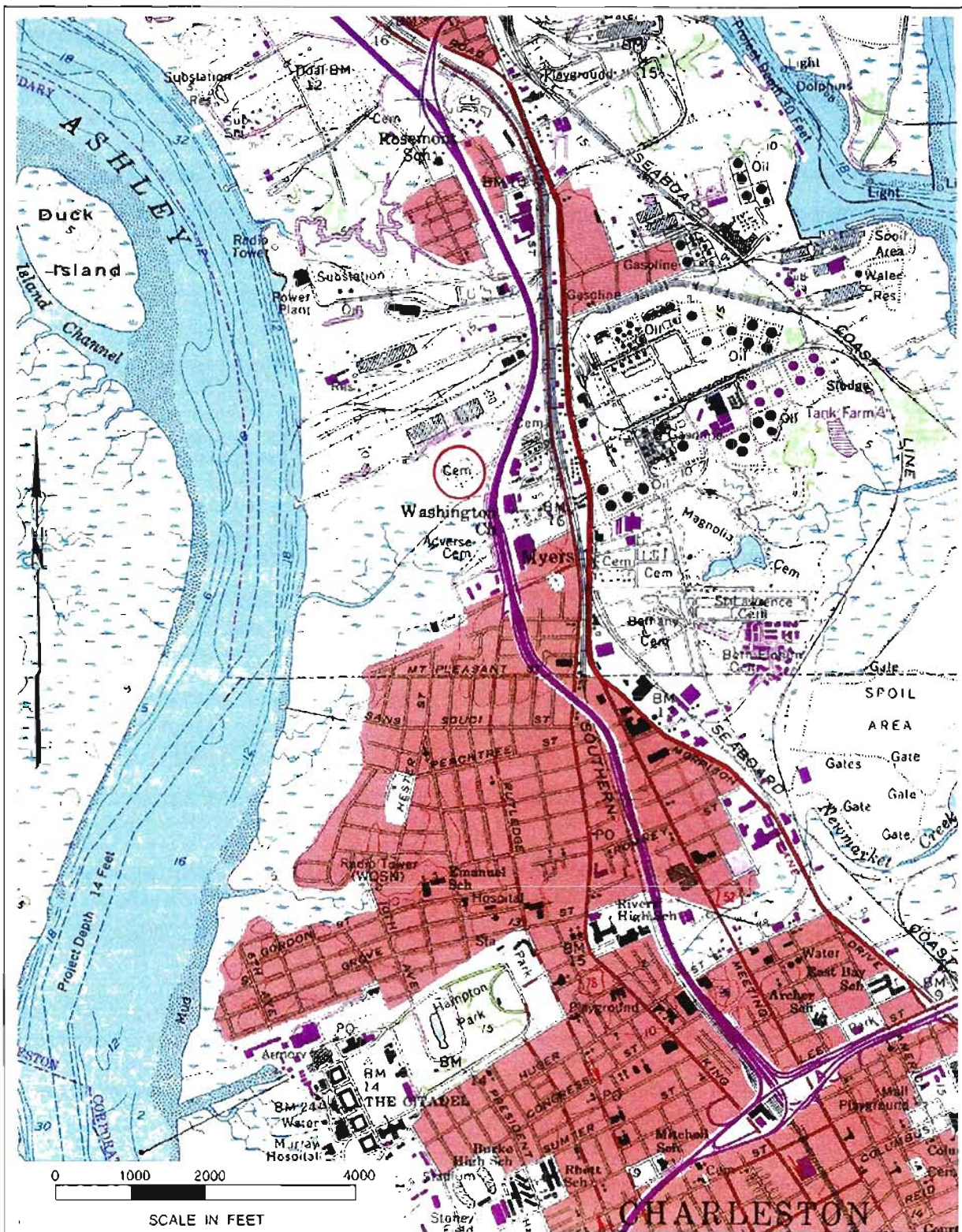


Figure 1. Project vicinity in the Charleston Neck area (basemap is USGS Charleston 1:24,000).



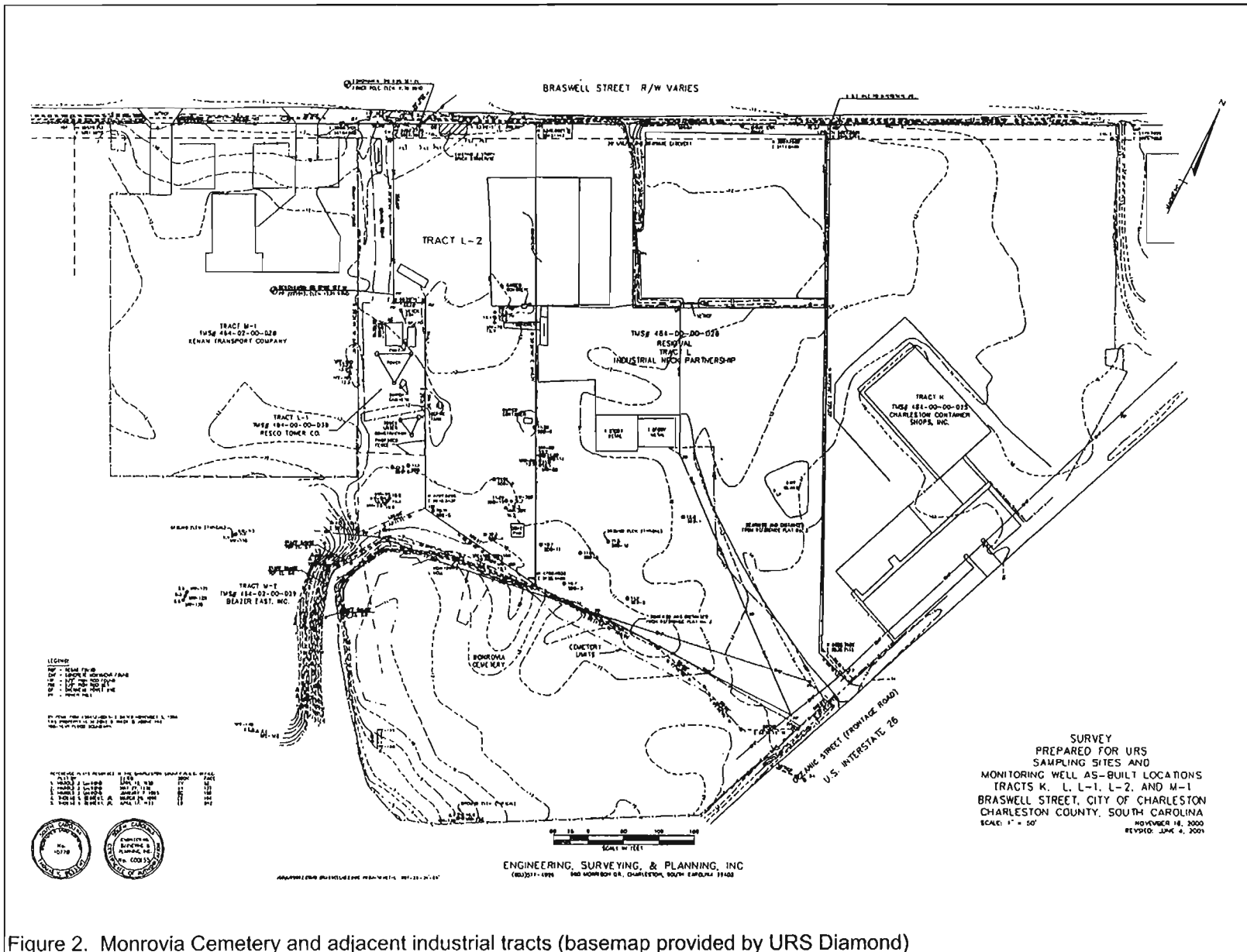


Figure 2. Monrovia Cemetery and adjacent industrial tracts (basemap provided by URS Diamond)

clippings, and tree limbs. It is also heavily overgrown, so that only limited areas can be conveniently examined. It is possible that broken stones, coping, and other cemetery related items may be found in the ditch. It is also likely, given the heavy industrial activity throughout the area, that a penetrometer would be ineffective as a tool for the discovery of graves. Even ground penetrating radar would likely reveal a wide range of difficult to interpret anomalies.

The following sections briefly recount the history thus far collected for the cemetery, field observations, and finally, recommendations concerning work in the cemetery area.

## HISTORIC SYNOPSIS

In December 1872 a Charleston grocer, Albert Koennecke, sold a tract of land to five individuals "as a Burial Place for the use and Benefit of a certain Association Known as the Monrovia Union Cemetery" for \$8,000. The deed also specifies that the individuals would "surrender the same to such person or persons as may from time to time be substituted in their place" (Charleston County RMC, DB J16, pg. 22).

The deed specifies that it was the "Farm of the late Dr. Tucker Harris" and was known as the Harris Farm. It had been acquired by Koennecke from George R. Richards in 1860 (Charleston County RMC, DB M14, pg. 31). While the property was described as 16¼ acres of high ground and 17 acres of marsh, it appears that the property was subsequently caught up in some form of legal battle. An 1879 plat shows the Koennecke property "now subdivided so as to show the portion of said farm proposed to be conveyed by the Master to Mr. W.L. Bradley, and also the portion proposed to be released to Jas D. Price & others for the Monrovia Union Cemetery Assn. together with the rights of way through the Cemetery to be retained by Mr. Bradley" (Charleston County RMC, PB C, pg. 8).

It appears that all of the marsh property originally deeded to the cemetery was acquired by Bradley, as well as a substantial portion of the high ground property to the north and northeast of the cemetery (see Figure 3). The cemetery retained a triangular shaped core at the edge of high ground, bordering the marsh, as well as a connected strip running northeast across SCRR right of way and terminating at the "Public Road from Charleston" (today King Street).

The plat also identifies the Monrovia Union property as "cemetery," suggesting that burials may already have taken place on the tract. It also reveals a road running along the northeast, east and southeast edge of the parcel, and continuing west and north to the adjacent property. This is certainly the access road to

which Bradley retained right-of-way. It seems likely that this is also part of the road which is still present in the cemetery today. The only substantive changes are that it no longer passes into the property to the north and it has been extended back to the northeast, forming a loop road around the cemetery parcel.

The plat also reveals that the northern boundary of the cemetery is clearly defined as a ditch ("ditch the line"). This ditch appears to extend eastward to some drainage shown only as being bridged by the cemetery access road.

The initial trustees or directors included James F. Price, John M. Reid, Charles Bryan, Thomas R. Small, and William Thomas. While this study did not search for these individuals in the Charleston City Directories, Charles Bryan appears in the 1870 Federal Census as a 73 year old African American living on James Island, while William Thomas was a 33 year old mulatto living in the Sixth Ward of Charleston. There were several Thomas Smalls listed in the census, including individuals living on Johns Island, the Sixth Ward, St. James Goose Creek, the Seventh Ward, and the Eighth Ward. Likewise, there were two individuals named James Price. One was a 23 year old living on James Island, while the other, 28 years old, lived in St. James Goose Creek. Additional work might help identify these original directors.

This research, however, was unsuccessful in identifying the group's incorporation either in the *Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly*, where records from 1870 through 1879 were examined, or in the *Charleston County, Clerk of Court, Petitions and Charters for Incorporation*, which date from 1868 through 1898. It may be that the organization was never formally incorporated.

At the time of the Civil War this portion of the Charleston Neck appears relatively rural. While Magnolia Cemetery was already active to

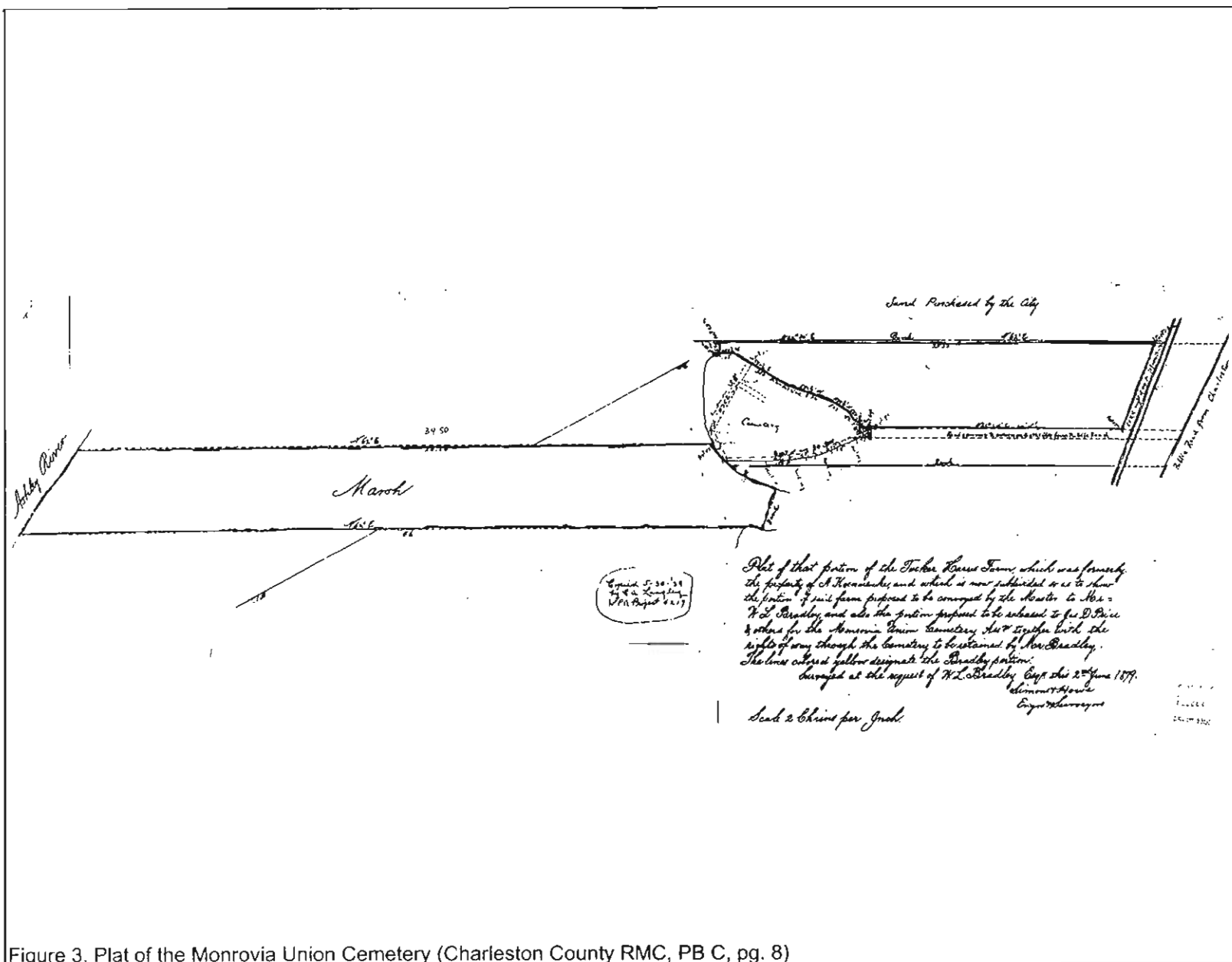


Figure 3. Plat of the Monrovia Union Cemetery (Charleston County RMC, PB C, pg. 8)

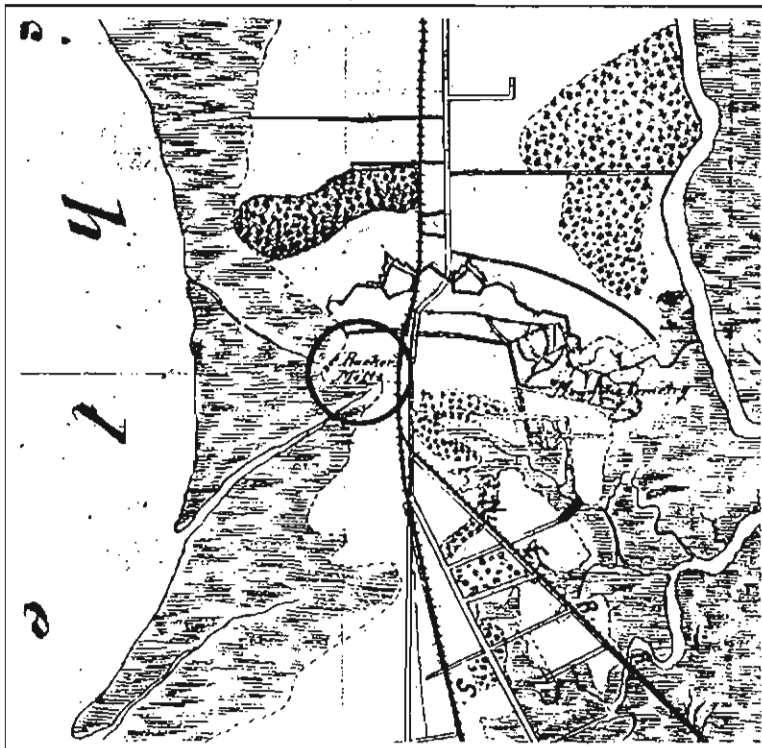


Figure 4. Portion of the ca. 1864 *Map of the Defences of Charleston City and Harbor* (National Archives RG77, Map I-56-1, scale 1"=2,500').

the east, the only activity of note on the Ashley was "Racker Mills," which appears to be in close proximity to what would become Monrovia Cemetery (Figure 4).

Regardless, the property to the north was very quickly dominated by the Ashepoo Fertilizer Company, which took over the lands previously awarded to W.L. Bradley. Figure 5 is an undated plat of the Ashepoo Fertilizer Company found in the McCrady Plats. It not only shows the same road network present in the cemetery shown in the 1879 plat, but reveals that the road to the marsh had been extended to a recently created island. The road is also extended northward across the boundary ditch. The ditch itself is still present and, coupled with the access road, appears to still form the northern boundary of the cemetery.

The Sanborn Insurance Maps provide relatively little assistance. While showing the

industrial activities to the north, variously identified as the Ashepoo Fertilizer Company, the Ashepoo Phosphate Company and, in the early twentieth century, the American Agricultural Chemical Company, the various maps provide no detail on the cemetery. The 1884 map shows a fence around the plant site, although this fence appears to be set northward of the ditch, suggesting that there may be some vacant ground adjacent to the cemetery (Figure 6).

Meanwhile, the Monrovia Union Cemetery Company disposed of portions of its holdings four times in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In 1907 its directors, then listed as William Edwards, N.W. Small, W.W. Rodolph, Edward G. Campfield, and H.J. Chisholm, sold a right-of-way to the Charleston and Summerville Electric Railway Company for \$500 (Charleston County RMC, DB H25, pg. 137). This tract, situated toward the eastern edge of the parcel, ran north-northeast - south-southwest.

In 1911 the cemetery directors divested themselves of another strip of property, again on the eastern edge, for \$3,000. This parcel was sold by the new directors, E.G. Campbell, W.W. Rodolph, H.J. Chisholm, M.F. Levy, and H.W. Small, to the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad (Charleston County RMS, DB Y25, pg. 80).

Additional property was sold the following year, 1912, to Ludwig Redinger for \$1,200 (Charleston County RMC, DB N26, pg. 139). The directors in this transaction are the same as the previous year. This parcel is the eastern portion of the original tract, butting to the north on Ashepoo Road, a private road leading to the fertilizer plant, east on Meeting Street, and west on the previous railroad rights-of-way.

In 1925 another tract, of 0.053 acre was granted to Charleston County for use by King Street Extension Sanitary and Drainage Commission in exchange for \$1,200. The directors

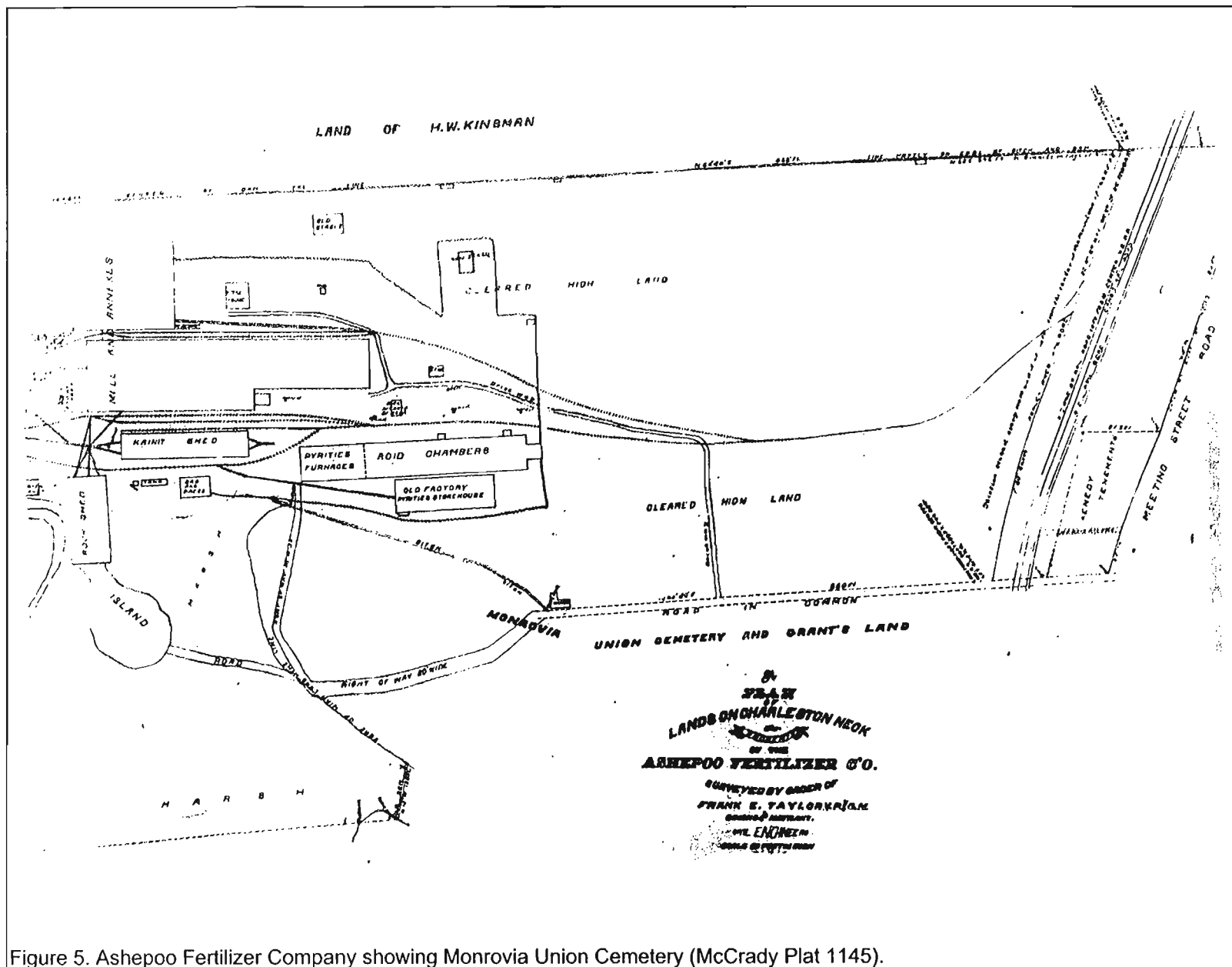


Figure 5. Ashepoo Fertilizer Company showing Monrovia Union Cemetery (McCrady Plat 1145).



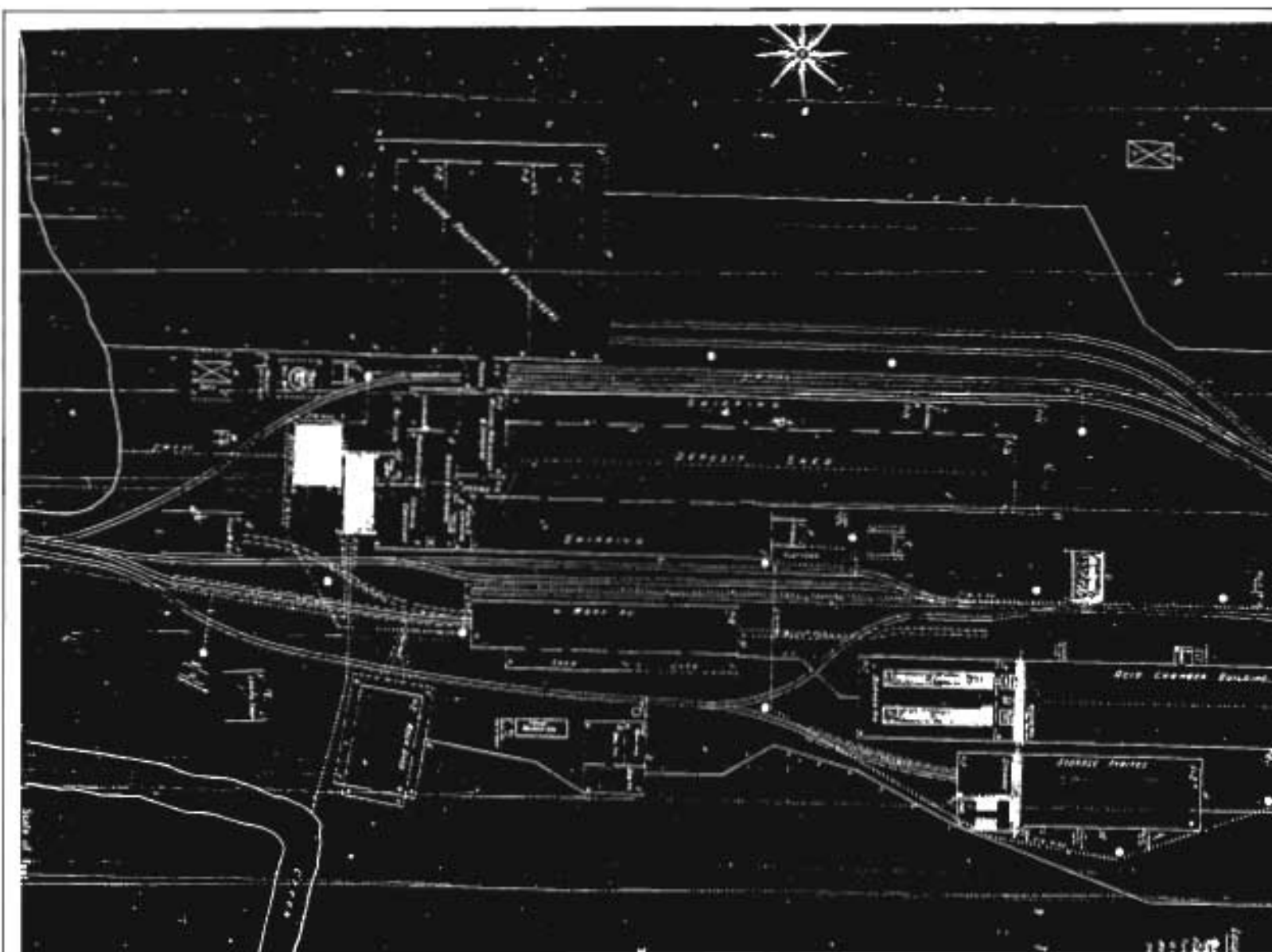


Figure 6. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 1884 showing the Ashepoo Fertilizer Company.

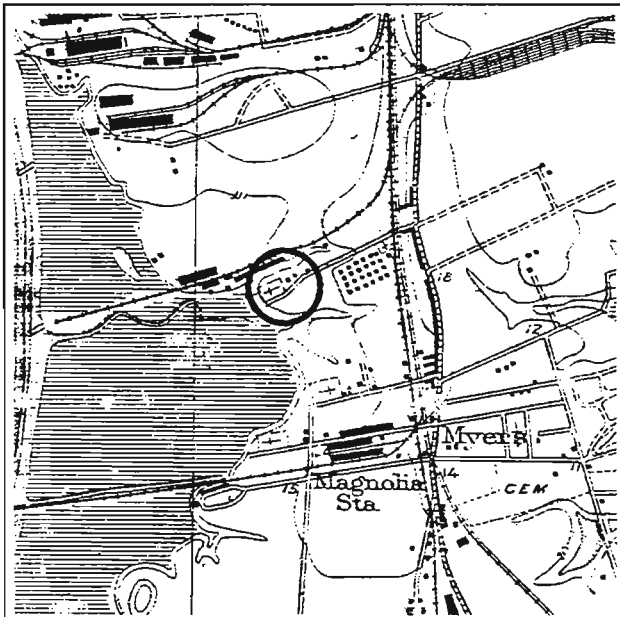


Figure 7. Portion of the 1919 USGS Charleston topographic map showing the cemetery vicinity (scale is 1:21,1200).

by this time included only H.J. Chisholm, W.W. Rodolph, and James H. Rodolph (Charleston County RMC, DB Z30, pg. 296).

While research did not extend past 1925, it appears that through time the entire access strip was sold, leaving the cemetery with only the central core adjacent to the marsh. The amount of loss can be easily seen by comparing Figures 2 and 3. Whether burials were present on this strip is unclear, although it does appear that the oldest portion of the cemetery is the eastern half where few stones are present. It is possible that some burials are found beyond the current boundaries to the east, toward I-26 and Meeting Street.

The first USGS topographic map, shown in Figure 7, shows the cemetery in 1919 as confined to the current tract. To the north is the American Agricultural Chemical Company's Ashepoo Plant, to the west is marsh, and to the south is a road (probably the same boundary and access road shown in the original plat). To the east are several structures, as well as a large neighborhood — all apparently on the various tracts sold off by the cemetery's directors. A 1923 map prepared by the Port Utilities Commission

shows essentially the same situation.

The 1943 USGS topographic map shows dramatic industrial development to the north of the Ashepoo plant, as well as considerable expansion in the immediate plant area. The cemetery, however, is in the same location and is shown as having the same size and shape. The 1943 map does show the western cemetery road crossing the ditch and extending north, into the Ashepoo plant site. It also shows a larger number of structures just beyond the cemetery, to the east (Figure 8).

The aerial photographs readily available for the project area are limited and generally of poor quality. Nevertheless, the 1949 aerial reveals a well defined road network in the cemetery. These roads appear to be identical to those shown on the 1879 plat (Figure 3), except that they form a complete loop (Figure 9). The aerial also suggests that while most of the cemetery is grassed, perhaps heavily, there is much bare earth in the northern corner or quadrant. The meaning of this is not at all clear. In addition, the ditch line is well defined, although clearly wooded or at least vegetated. Beyond the ditch is cleared

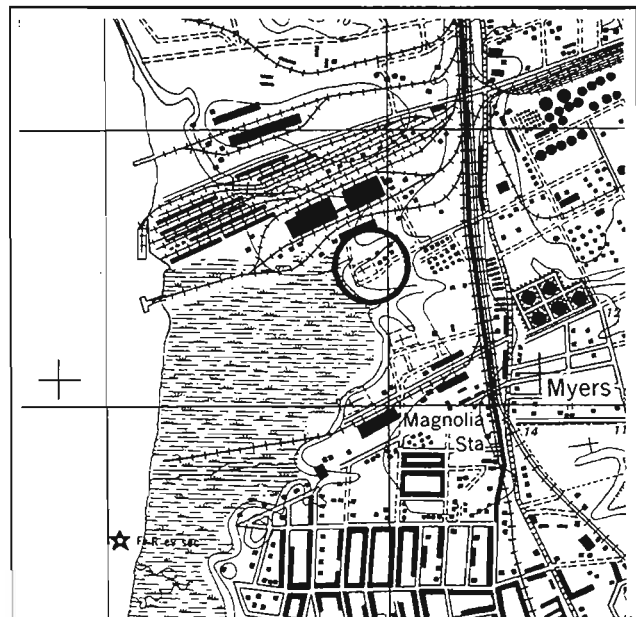


Figure 8. Portion of the 1943 USGS Charleston topographic map showing the cemetery (scale is 1:25,000).

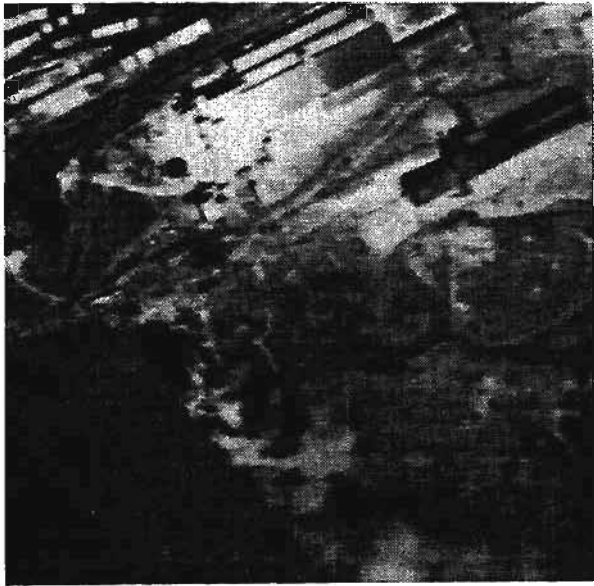


Figure 9. 1949 aerial photograph of the cemetery area.

industrial property. This suggests that at least by 1949 it would be unlikely that any burials were taking place north of the ditch, regardless of fencing. In fact, it's likely that much of this seemingly open area was actually the remains of Ashepoo Road and the laborers' houses which

had been constructed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The southwest corner of the wood frame acid chamber building is in close proximity to the cemetery. Earlier (see Figure 6), the pyrite storage building was immediately on the north side of the ditch — further reducing the likelihood for burials being present (or at least preserved) beyond the modern limits of the cemetery.

There was little change into the 1960s. One of the best aerial photographs, from 1967, reveals that the acid chamber building is still standing, just a short distance from the northern tip of the ditch. The cemetery road is still well defined, although the extensive disturbance in the northern quadrant of the cemetery is no longer visible — suggesting that the entire area was grassed by this time (Figure 10). By this time I-26 was constructed.

No significant changes to the cemetery are immediately obvious through the 1982 aerial. At that time the property is still well defined to the north by the ditch. The marsh to the west is somewhat less well defined, possibly the result of lowering sea levels and industrial dumping.



Figure 10. 1967 aerial photograph of the cemetery area.

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MONROVIA UNION CEMETERY

## CURRENT CONDITION

The cemetery is today accessed by way of Oceanic Street, a frontage road for I-26. The

chained gate which was open at the time of this inspection. Given the condition of the padlocks it seems unlikely that the gates are frequently closed.



Figure 11. Sign for the Monrovia Cemetery, view to the south.

Within the chain link fence there is a second entrance consisting of CMU gate posts supporting a cast iron gate, although it, too, is unlikely to ever be closed. The road is a single travel lane with asphalt paving. Some evidence of an earlier road is found to the north or right of the entrance (Figure 12). Beyond is a large area with no markings. Walking this area, however, there are subtle topographic variations suggesting that graves are likely present, but unmarked.

In the northern quadrant of the cemetery there is a noticeable rise, about 2 to 3 feet in height (Figure 13; see also Figure 2). The area is heavily dominated by twentieth century vault burials (burials where a concrete vault

entrance is marked by a faded and somewhat dilapidated sign (Figure 11). Only one of the three phone numbers shown on the sign appears to still be associated with the cemetery. There is a chain link fence just beyond the road and a

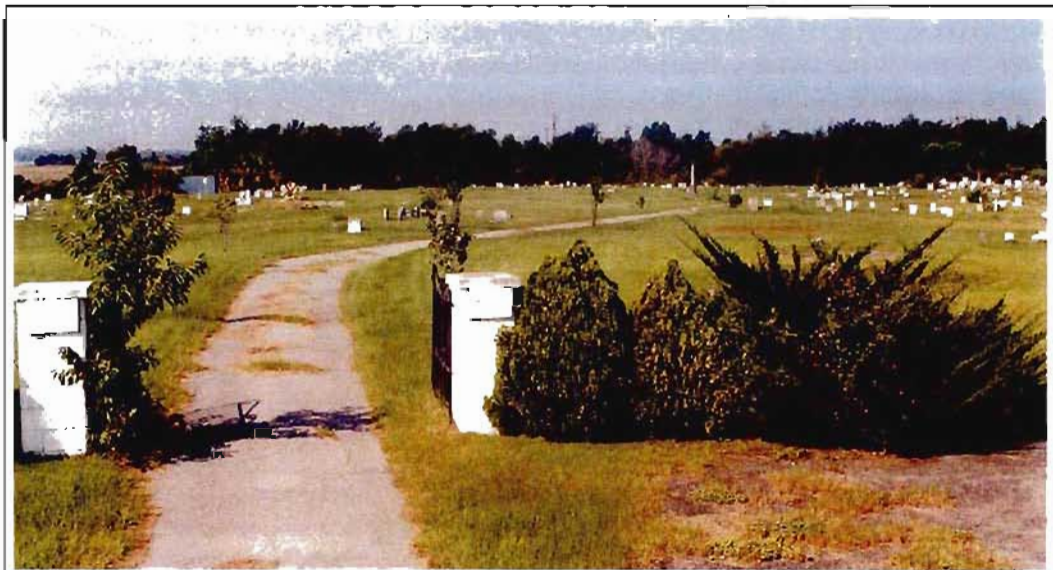


Figure 12. View of the cemetery from the entrance looking west.



Figure 13. View of the rise in the northwestern quadrant of the cemetery looking west

is used as the flush to ground marker). A recently opened grave reveals that this rise or mound is artificial, consisting of lensed soil (Figure 14). It is likely that this rise and its associated activities are what are so clearly seen in the 1949 aerial. It is, however, uncertain whether this represents fill soil brought into the cemetery specifically to raise the level of the ground in this area, or whether it represents spoil from graves which was dumped in this one area and spread out. Regardless, it appears to be relatively modern and the soil does not appear to contain any industrial material, any mucked soils, or phosphate debris. In other words, it appears to originate with the cemetery.

A brief examination of the ditch reveals that it varies from about 4 to 6 feet in width, gradually tapering to the east. It is about 5 feet in depth. Today it is choked with vegetation; while the cemetery grounds appear to be periodically mowed, there seems to be no maintenance of the ditch or its banks. In addition, the area has at least recently been used for disposal of flower arrangements, wire stands, styrofoam, and other cemetery-related debris. Also noticed were a number of areas where cement had been dumped over the edge, likely remnants of mix used in setting modern markers. At least one stone fragment (likely a section of either coping or a

stone fence post) was found in the ditch. Regrettably it is not uncommon to find such materials discarded on the edge of cemeteries. They represent materials which have either become broken or which were in the way of backhoes used to excavate graves.

The cemetery includes a

range of marker types. While dies on bases and, more recently, vault markers are common, there are also some evidencing greater age. There are commercial headstones from the nineteenth century, although they are generally of thin marble, lightly carved. These stones are heavily worn, with the inscription often illegible. In some cases the marble itself is badly sugaring or even spalling. One unusual marker is a marble table top, which has been commercially carved on its reverse side and used as a headstone.

Concrete markers are not common, although at least one whitewashed concrete cross is present, associated with canna lilies. There are several individual graves which are fenced. In one case the fencing is pipe railing set into granite corner posts. In another case, cast iron railing sections have been used to create something resembling a bedstead or cradle grave marker. Individual graves are also often marked with low wire or picket fences (much of this fencing material is found discarded in the ditch).

Plantings are common in the cemetery, including ground covers as well as larger plants. Grave goods, including containers and various ceramic figurines, are also found on a number of





Figure 14. Lensed soil of the rise exposed in a recently opened grave shaft.

relatively modern graves. Several graves were also found intentionally mounded up — a relatively old practice among African Americans. These mounded graves are also in areas where no grass is growing and the area is covered with sand.

There are also a number of monitoring wells placed in the cemetery, along the edge of the ditch or marsh lines. At the southwestern edge of the cemetery there is a cargo container which is being used to store grave side items, such as chairs, carpet, and a lifter.

The examination of the ditch did not reveal any obvious intrusive graves, although little of the ditch was actually visible. The inspection, however, did reveal that clearly marked graves were present with several yards of the ditch. It is also possible that the area to the east contains unmarked graves.

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MONROVIA UNION CEMETERY

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief historical review found that the Monrovia Union Cemetery was organized in 1872 and that burials were likely made in the property by 1879 when a plat was prepared and the actual size of the cemetery was somewhat reduced from the original deed.

Subsequently the cemetery continued to shrink in size, with portions to the east being sold off by the directors of the organization. In fact, in the first quarter of the twentieth century the organization made over \$5,400 from the disposition of relatively small pieces. Additional sales likely took place throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, to the point where the cemetery stabilized at about 3.7 acres. Given the current evidence it is uncertain whether any of the portions of the original grant which have been disposed of contained burials. Given the extraordinary development of the area, any remains which might have been present are unlikely to survive today.

It seems likely, given the topography, that the current eastern portion of the cemetery parcel contains some burials. Very few graves in this area are marked. In fact, there are relatively few nineteenth and early twentieth century marked graves, suggesting that a number of the early graves were impermanently marked, perhaps using wooded markers.

One relatively stable feature of the cemetery, however, is the ditch. It is shown in the earliest plat and continues to be visible on aerial photographs throughout the mid- to late-twentieth century. More than any fence, this ditch was likely the boundary for burials. Beyond the ditch there was historically very intensive industrial activity. The combination of a clearly defined neighbor, as well as a clearly demarcated boundary makes it seem unlikely that burials would have crossed the line.

We have been told that this ditch has moved somewhat over time. The quality of the

aerial photographs available to us did not allow any detailed assessment of this statement. Thus, while it seems unlikely that burials would have ever extended northward of the ditch, we cannot verify that the ditch location has remained stable.

With enhancement it might be possible to use historic aerial photographs to evaluate the potential for significant ditch movement, although none of the available historic photographs have anything approaching 1-meter resolution. Moreover, the industrial activities have so significantly changed the topography and compaction of the soils to the north of the ditch that it is unlikely that either a penetrometer survey or even ground penetrating radar would be able to identify anomalies.

Consequently, our best recommendation is that all ground disturbing activities within 30 feet of the ditch be carefully monitored for any evidence of bones, coffin parts, or other unusual features. In particular all work *within* the ditch should be very carefully conducted, removing only limited quantities of soil at a time. This should be coupled with careful visual inspection for any rectangular stains which might represent grave shafts. Again, any identification of bone, wood, or metal fragments from the ditch area should be treated as potential graves and further evaluated.

We also recommend against any fill activities associated with the ditch. While the current plans suggest that the cemetery limits, in some areas, are south of the ditch, this does not seem consistent with the historic evidence. Consequently, even fill activities have the potential to alter the nature of the cemetery and potentially disturb burials.

We recommend that Chicora be consulted should any unusual features (such as rectangular stains), coffin parts (such as wood or iron fragments, handles, or other unusual materials), or bones be encountered. We have the ability to identify the materials and determine if they do, in

fact, represent human remains or coffin parts.

We are not attorneys and cannot offer legal advice. However, if such items are found, we recommend that all land disturbing activities in the immediate vicinity should immediately cease. Initially the Charleston County Coroner must be notified. The coroner will determine if the remains represent a possible forensic case (i.e., a crime scene). In some cases the coroner will assert control over remains found in likely association with a cemetery. If they do not, we then recommend contacting the State Archaeologist with the S.C. Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. This individual has assumed jurisdiction over human remains for which the coroner takes no responsibility.

Regardless of who assumes jurisdiction, it is unlikely that any further work will be allowed within the boundary of the area assumed to contain human remains. Those remains which have been uncovered will need to be collected for reburial. The process of collection should be conducted by a forensic anthropologist who is familiar with the nature of historic skeletal remains. Under South Carolina law it will be necessary to have a funeral director present during the recovery process. Once all remains have been collected, they will be turned over to the funeral director, who will make arrangements for reburial.

The cost of the collection and subsequent reburial must be borne by URS Diamond and/or Conoco. While not specifically an "abandoned cemetery" it is likely that the handling of any identified remains would come under Section 27-43-10 et seq. of the South Carolina Code of Laws, as amended ("Removal of Abandoned Cemeteries").

Failure to follow these steps would likely subject the contractor to the provisions of Section 16-17-600, South Carolina Code of Laws, as amended ("Destruction or Desecration of Human Remains or Repositories Thereof"). Violation of this section is a felony and, upon conviction, individuals are subject to fines of no more than \$5,000 or imprisonment of not more than five years.

**Cemetery Preservation Plans**

**Historical Research**

**Identification of Grave Locations  
and Mapping**

**Condition Assessments**

**Treatment of Stone and Ironwork**



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