

**REMOVAL OF ONE BURIAL FROM
ST. JOHANNES CEMETERY, BENSENVILLE,
ILLINOIS**



Chicora Research Contribution 530

REMOVAL OF ONE BURIAL FROM ST. JOHANNES CEMETERY, BENSENVILLE, ILLINOIS

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CHICORA RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 530



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August 2010

This report is printed on permanent paper ∞

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

This study briefly reports on the search for one burial, and the excavation and removal of one additional burial from St. Johannes Cemetery in Bensenville, Illinois. This represents a second phase of activity at this cemetery by Chicora Foundation. The cemetery began in the first half of the nineteenth century and continues in use today. It was historically associated with the German-American community of small farmers that settled in the area and at least into the 1930s was still called the Evangelical St. Johannes Kirche and Cemetery. Today the cemetery includes about 1,400 burials on the roughly 2.5 acre cemetery and church lot.

St. Johannes, however, is best known as the eye of the storm centered on the expansion of the O'Hare International Airport and the City of Chicago's efforts to seize the property using eminent domain and require the removal of the burials. To this end the Louis Berger Group out of Morristown, New Jersey has been awarded a \$10 million contract to remove the burials once the City has managed to acquire the property. The efforts, however, are still tied up in last minute legal efforts.

It is worth noting that as one part in the City of Chicago's effort to remove the cemetery, the City's O'Hare Modernization Act, pushed through the Illinois legislature, exempts the City from complying with a variety of state laws, including the Illinois Human Skeletal Remains Protection Act, as well as the Illinois Archaeological and Paleontological Resources Protection Act, and even various provisions of the Illinois Municipal Code governing cemetery removal.

Chicora Foundation was contacted by the Geils Funeral Home in April 2009 in anticipation of several families requesting the removal of graves prior to the City's ownership of the cemetery. The Geils Funeral Home, while more than capable of removing those remains in vaults, desired that skeltonized remains not in vaults be removed in a professional, dignified, and respectful manner. We were therefore contracted to participate in the removal process. The results of that first phase of investigation have been previously reported as Research Contribution 519.

In June 2010 the Foundation was again contacted and requested to participate in the removal of two additional burials, both infants. One was [REDACTED]. The other was known simply as Baby Girl [REDACTED]. The exhumations were conducted on August 3-4, 2010. Representing the Geils Funeral Home on-site was Mr. Bruce Leathem.

The first infant, [REDACTED] died in 1949 and was reportedly buried on top of her grandmother's vault [REDACTED] (1922-1944). This infant was searched for, but no remains were found.

The second infant, Baby Girl [REDACTED] was apparently a still born. Only the marker for the grave had been removed by the Louis Berger Group, but the grave site had been marked by the Church. This burial was identified and removed.

Although detailed osteological studies were not possible, the families did permit brief metric and non-metric analyses while the

remains were being removed. In addition, casket remains and casket trimmings were available for photography prior to reburial.

With only one burial available for study, little can be said regarding the remains. It is worth noting that this burial, compared to the previous two infant burials removed by Chicora, failed to include clothing remains, and coffin remains were limited to a closure device and nails. The burial appears far less ornate than those previously identified. However, like previous burials, the [REDACTED] infant was deeply buried. And, in spite of the grave's water logged condition, bone preservation was consistent with that found at the other graves.

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INTRODUCTION

Chicora's previous report (Trinkley et al. 2009; a redacted version is available on-line at <http://www.chicora.org/pdfs/RC519%20redacted.pdf> for the public; a full report was provided the Geils Funeral Home) should be consulted for information concerning the project area, its history, the history of St. Johannes Cemetery, and background information on the German-American community in the Bensenville area. This information will not be repeated here.

It is important to note that the cemetery - St. Johannes -- is still in active use, being associated with the United Church of Christ.

The Project

In August 2009 Chicora participated in the archaeological removal of four burials from the nineteenth century cemetery known as St. Johannes or St. Johns at the edge of the O'Hare International Airport in the vicinity of Chicago, Illinois. Conducted under the auspices of the Geils Funeral Home in Bensenville, Illinois, four individuals were removed, including one adult, one adolescent, and two infants (Trinkley et al. 2009).

Since the original removals by Chicora, the Louis Berger Group took advantage of a short-lived court order that allowed the City of Chicago to begin removing burials. This work, however, was halted after only a few days. We are not aware that Berger has produced any report of their investigations and no such document has been made available to us.

Subsequently, Geils Funeral Home has continued to remove occasional vaulted remains, but John Geils had been placed in charge of the more recent exhumations and the

on-site work is being handled by licensed funeral director Bruce Leathem.

Chicora was contacted in late June 2010 by the Geils Funeral Home concerning assistance in the removal of two additional burials. We were requested to again use forensic archaeological/anthropological techniques that would respect the remains while ensuring complete recovery. As in the case of the last investigations, our involvement was to be limited to the identification of the burials, their exposure, and removal with only very limited in-field metric and non-metric observations of the human remains. As previously explained, while Illinois has very comprehensive laws protecting human remains that provide detailed provisions on identification, recovery, and analysis, these laws are not applicable and there is no legal requirement that forensic techniques be used and no minimum level of professional analysis dictated by Illinois law.

Materials were to be boxed and turned over to a representative of the Geils Funeral Home for immediate reburial. Similarly, all cultural remains, including coffin hardware and clothing items, were documented and then turned over to the funeral home for reburial.

While this project, like the one before it, fails to provide comprehensive analysis of the human remains (for example, no dental casts were made, no radiographs were taken, and no samples were retained for destructive chemical studies), it does make some minimal contributions to our understanding of early twentieth century rural Illinois populations. In addition, the analysis of coffin hardware presents an interesting introduction to the materials available at the time. It is also possible to compare and contrast the findings of this

study with those provided by the 2009 investigations. Perhaps it will eventually be possible to include the remains removed by Berger in the comparative study.

Neither of the burials was identified in the records of Geils Funeral Home and no death certificates were found for either infant.

The investigations were conducted from Tuesday, August 3 through Wednesday, August 4, 2010 by Ms. Debi Hacker (osteologist), and Ms. Nicole Southerland (archaeologist). The field director and principal investigator was Dr. Michael Trinkley. Oversight and project management was provided by Mr. Bruce Leathem (Illinois Funeral Director and Embalmer, License 034010954).

Project Conditions

Although conducted at almost the same time of the year as the initial studies in 2009, the current excavations came after a season of extensive rainfall. The Elliott soils are recognized as somewhat poorly drained and the intermittent perched seasonal high water table was clearly identified during these studies. Water was freely flowing into the excavations at a depth of 2 feet.

While this water made excavations difficult, we found preservation to be equal that previously encountered. Ferrous remains were in poor condition, while wood and bone were in generally satisfactory condition.

Burial Documentation

The first infant was identified as [REDACTED] who is thought to have died in 1949. Family accounts have the infant being buried on top of the vault of their grandmother, [REDACTED] (1922-1944). The Church, however, has no record of the burial.

The second infant was identified as only Baby Girl [REDACTED] a still born buried in 1908. This grave was marked by a stone (although the stone had been removed by Berger by the time of this study).

EXCAVATIONS

General Methods

This was not what most would consider to be a traditional archaeological excavation – the City of Chicago’s O’Hare Modernization Act which exempted its activities from the Illinois Human Skeletal Remains Protection Act did not allow that level of sophistication. Our involvement was limited to the careful identification, limited documentation, and removal of skeletal remains not contained within vaults.

Vault removals were conducted by the Geils Funeral Home with assistance from Stark & Son Excavating. This work consisted of probing to identify the vault location, followed by backhoe excavation and removal. Sealed vaults were not opened, but were transported to the new cemetery for reburial.

The A horizon soils were initially removed by backhoe (a 3-foot toothed bucket was used; a toothless bucket was not available) after which the B horizon soils were flat shoveled in an effort to identify the grave shaft. With the identification of the grave, the backhoe was again used to continue the removal of the overlying soil until wood casket remains were encountered. At that point the mechanical excavated ceased and hand excavation began – first by shovel and eventually using small hand tools. The goal was to minimize the time required to identify the casket remains while ensuring that no damage was done to either the skeletal remains or the casket furniture.

No mapping of grave locations was conducted, although we do have sketch maps of the various locations. We understand that St. Johannes Cemetery has a map of the various burial plots, although it was not available

during this work. Vertical control was maintained using only below surface measurements, all of which are in metric.

Materials found in the excavations, such as casket furniture and clothing items if present, were brush cleaned on-site and photographed. All items were placed in the new caskets for reburial and there was no provision for more detailed study.

Similarly, skeletal remains were exposed, cleaned in situ where possible, and photographed. Only limited metric and non-metric observations were possible given the time frame allowed for the exhumations.

████████████████████

This infant was buried in 1949, but otherwise there was very little information concerning the remains. There was no information concerning the death in the Geils Funeral Home records and this, coupled with the time period, suggests that the burial may have been conducted by the family. The St. Johannes Cemetery records were silent on the infant’s location. Oral history in the family placed the infant on top of the vaulted remains of her grandmother, ██████████ (1922-1944).

The marker for ██████████ was present, although two vaulted burials to the south and one vaulted burial to the north had already been removed prior to our involvement (Figures 1 and 2).

With the removal of the Cosman marker, we began by gradually peeling back the A horizon soil overlying the vault. Since the burial, if present, would be found in previously

disturbed soil, it would not be as recognizable as other inhumations that penetrated the subsoil. Consequently we were specifically looking for

conducted to remove the vaults to the north and south of the Cosman grave.

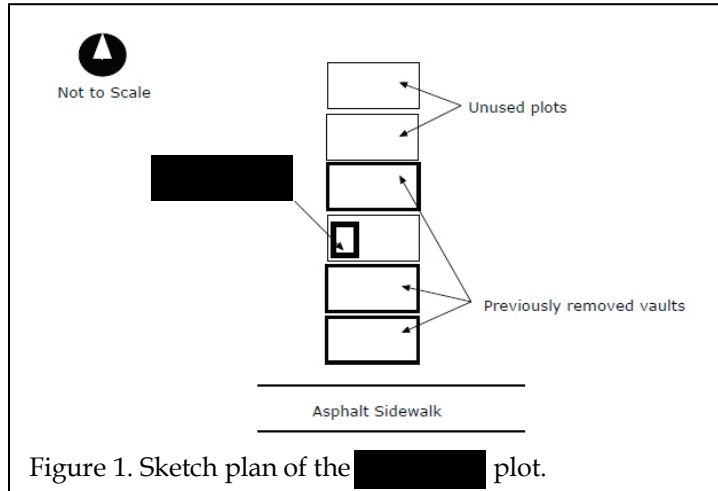


Figure 1. Sketch plan of the [redacted] plot.

The only remaining locations that had not been either explored or disturbed by recent grave excavations were the two unused plots to the north. Although we recommended that these areas be examined, we understand that the family chose not to further explore the plot.

Thus, while no evidence of the infant was found either overlying the [redacted] vault or at its foot, we cannot state that the burial does not exist in the Schweitzer plot since we did not explore the area to the north. Nor can we state that the infant's grave was not destroyed with the earlier removal of vaulted remains

evidence of the wood casket or other distinctive features. None were encountered.

since we were not present when those remains were removed.

With the exposure of the vault top, about 2 feet below grade, we turned our attention to the foot of the grave, thinking that the burial might have been placed beyond the

Baby Girl [redacted]

We understand that the marker for this plot had been removed by the Louis Berger Group, which originally intended to remove the burial, but was stopped when the court action allowing the City to undertake the work was overturned. With the marker removed, Rev. Michael Kirchhoff marked the grave location with flags to prevent the grave from becoming "lost." This was fortunate since grave locations can become confused easily; we do not recommend that markers be removed until immediately prior to exhumation.

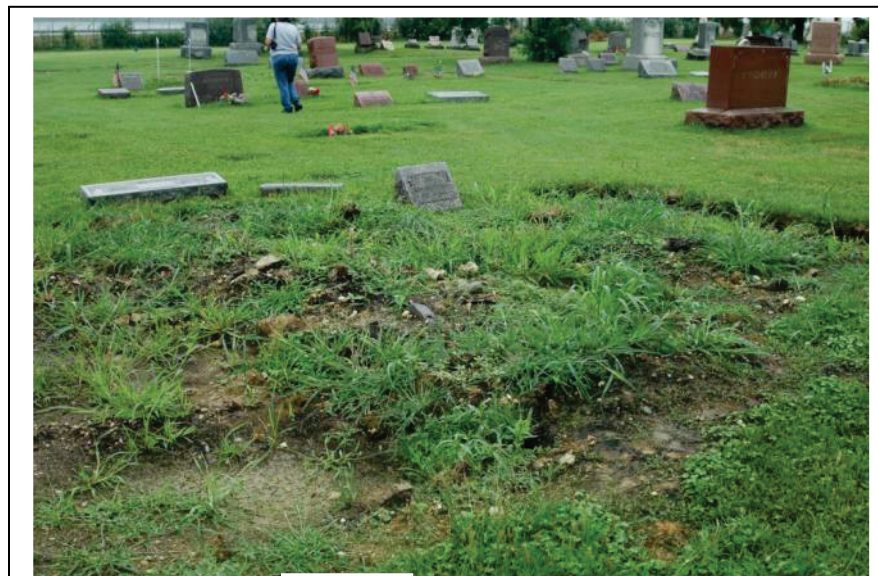


Figure 2. View of the [redacted] plot looking to the northwest.

Cosman vault in order to achieve a greater depth. Excavations were carried to subsoil without any evidence of a burial. We did, however, identify the excavations that had been

We understand that the burial took place in 1908 and that the infant was a stillborn.

EXCAVATIONS

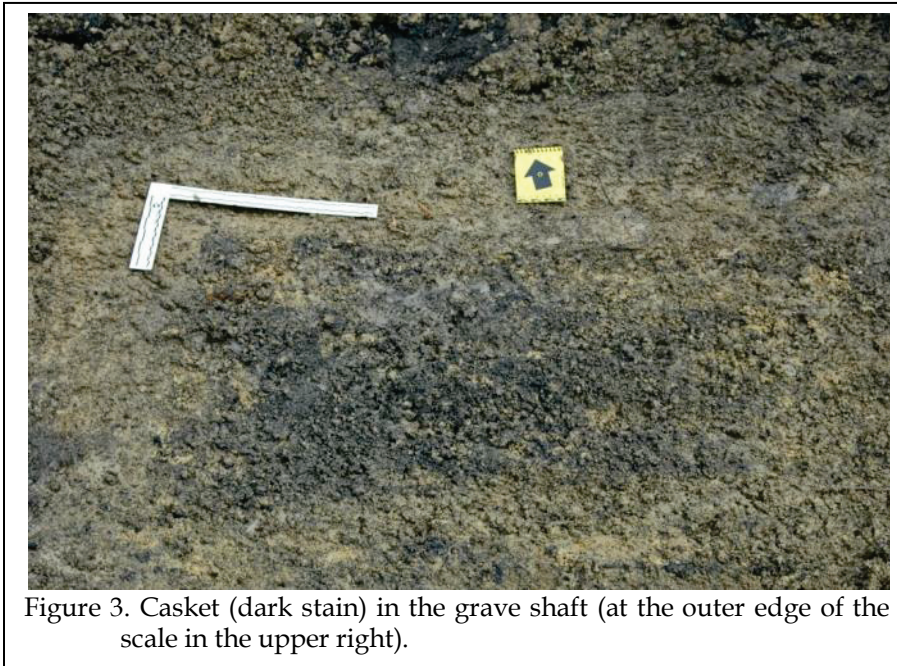


Figure 3. Casket (dark stain) in the grave shaft (at the outer edge of the scale in the upper right).

The grave was initially exposed by backhoe, with excavations progressing to a depth of about 60 cm (2.0 feet) when the grave shaft was clearly identifiable. The grave shaft was found to measure 102 cm (3.3 foot) north-south by 62 cm (2.0 foot) east-west. The footing was found at the west end, slightly off-center from the grave shaft, probably because it had been placed some time after the burial when the grave was no longer distinctly visible. Like other marker footings found in the cemetery, it was substantial, being 65 cm in depth.

At a depth of 89 cm (2.9 feet) the interior wood box in the grave shaft became visible. This box measured 80 cm. (2.6 feet) by 52 cm (1.7 feet). The top of the box had collapsed under the weight of the soil, but the depth of the casket is estimated to have been about 26 cm (0.85 foot).

Because of rapid water infiltration, it was necessary to drain the excavation using a sump pit to the south. This sump was kept dewatered using a 2-inch trash pump provided by Stark & Son Excavating.

The presence of nails suggests that surrounding this casket was a wood shipping box, although no intact wood remains were found (although the stain was clearly identified).

In spite of excellent casket wood preservation, we found no indication of any fabric covering. Likewise, the only hardware identified was a single latch on the south side of the casket, as well as additional nails. The casket itself was very plain, consisting of multiple 1/2-inch planks with supports underneath.



Figure 4. Excavation of the [REDACTED] burial. A drainage is shown on the south side leading to a sump pit to collect water.



Figure 5. Wood exposed at the top of the casket. North is at the top of the photograph.

were recovered by water screening through 1/8-inch mesh.

Excavation revealed that the only remains present, found under the collapsed lid, were skull fragments. No clothing items were identified.

All remains were removed and placed in a new combination vault/casket for reburial.

Summary

The one identified burial is consistent with those infant burials previously removed. The burial pit was uniformly distinct with fill including both dark, humic A horizon soil, and the lighter B horizon clays from penetrating the subsoil. The fluctuating seasonal water table - which was very high at the time of this disinterment - appears to have caused little blurring of the grave outlines. This burial, at about 89 cm, is slightly shallower than those previously removed (which ranged from 120 to 150 cm below surface).

In spite of active water flowing into the grave, the burial produced identifiable remains. While in situ analysis was not possible because of the very muddy condition of the burial, remains were in remarkably good condition and

REMAINS

As previously discussed, no evidence of [REDACTED] was identified; this section will deal only with the remains associated with Baby Girl [REDACTED]

Clothing and Casket Remains

Clothing

No clothing remains were identified. Although recovery conditions were difficult because of the exceptionally high ground water, we believe that had clothing items – such as a safety pin found previously with the [REDACTED] burial (Trinkley et al. 2009) – been present, some evidence would have been found. The absence suggests that this infant was simply wrapped in a sheet or light blanket prior to burial.

We have previously suggested that the absence of clothing should not be interpreted as unusual. Neither should the absence of a closure device – the blanket may simply have been wrapped or tied closed.

Casket and Hardware

As previously discussed, a shipping or outer box was revealed by the presence of nails, although no intact wood was identified. The casket or interior box was identified with good wood preservation. This box had exterior measurements of 2 feet 7 inches by 1 foot 8 inches and was approximately 10 inches in depth.

This seems to be a rather large casket for a still born. For example, the 1916 United States Casket Company (Pittsburg) advised that for a child of 3 months or under a 2-0 casket (i.e., measuring 2 feet in length) was suitable. That

casket would measure 9¾ inches in width and 8½ inches in depth. A note specifies to add 2½ inches to these dimensions to determine the exterior size. Thus, exterior measurements would have been about 2 feet by 1 foot by 11 inches.

It seems likely that the casket used – perhaps the only one readily available – was for an older child and was simply pressed into service. Alternatively, it may have been a discontinued or floor model and was provided at a reduced cost. Without records, we can only speculate on the need for the oversized casket.

The wood from the casket was eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*). This has been associated with other caskets recovered from the cemetery by Chicora (Trinkley et al. 2009).

This pine has a range covering much of the United States, although it is more common in northern Illinois typically on well drained, somewhat acidic soils. The wood was highly sought since huge, knot free, boards were the rule rather than the exception (Ling 2003). Once an extremely important lumber species, the white pine was extensively over harvested and one source estimates that its density has declined by more than 80% (Thompson et al. 2006:66).

The nails recovered are highly corroded, but appear to be machine cut. Additional details could not be ascertained without conservation treatments, which were not undertaken. This style was common during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although wire nails were making significant in-roads. They were recovered from both the outer box and the casket. Sizes range from 2½ to 3 inches (8-10d).

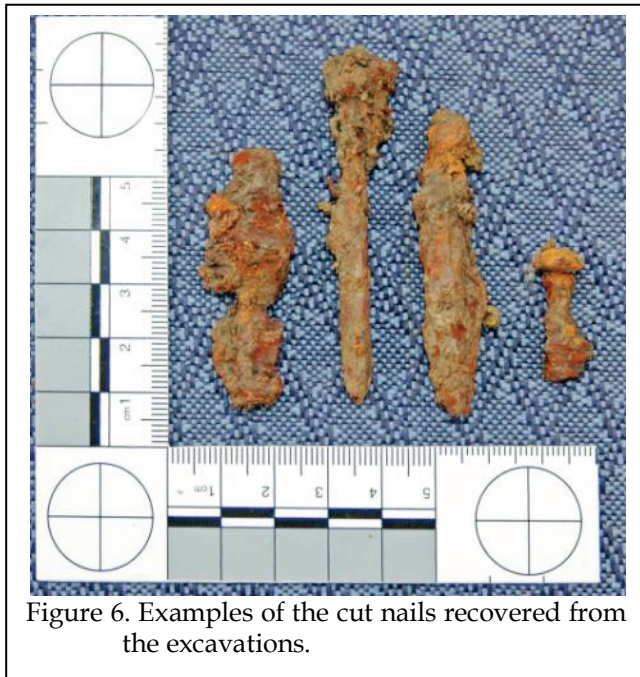


Figure 6. Examples of the cut nails recovered from the excavations.

Cut nails, in a 2-inch size, are shown as late as about 1925 in the F.H. Hill Company Funeral Merchandise catalog.

We have previously noted that one author (Davidson 1999:58) has suggested casket manufacturers switched from cut to wire nails between 1895 and 1900. The Chicago data

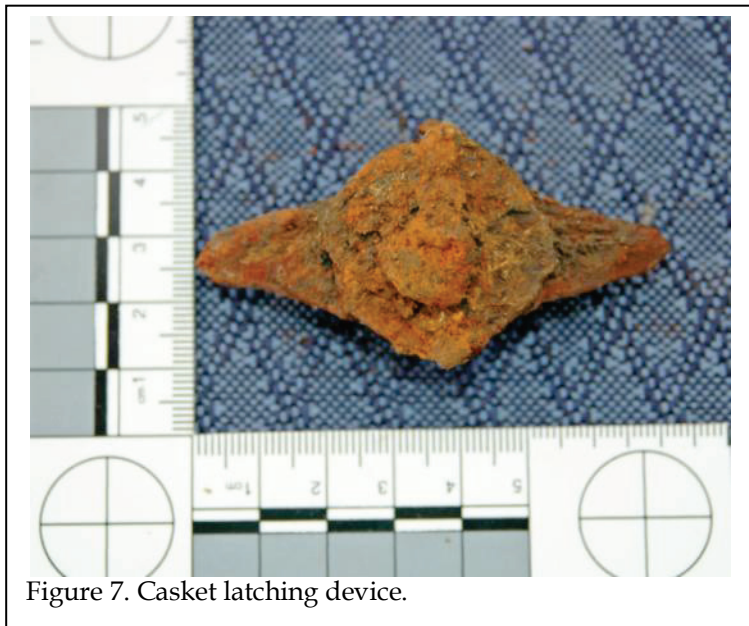


Figure 7. Casket latching device.

continues to call this interpretation into question, suggesting the switch in some areas may not have taken place until the early decades of the 1900s.

The only hardware recovered is a ferrous item that appears to be a latching device for the casket (Figure 7). This is a style that we have not previously encountered.

It is worth commenting that this was the least decorated casket identified in the small sample removed by Chicora. While the absence of some remains, such as fabric, may be explained by the poor preservation, there were no handles or other hardware. It is unclear if this is related to the stillborn status or if it may indicate economic status of the [REDACTED] family.

Skeletal Remains

The excavation was of a female infant, reported by family members to have been a stillborn buried in 1908. Coffin materials (discussed above) were revealed to have collapsed through time with deterioration and soil weight being key factors. At birth, an infant has 450 bone centers, which will unite through growth to become the 206 bones of an adult. Because an infant's bones are largely cartilaginous with little ossification, there is a greater likelihood of post-mortem degradation (Baker et al.2005).

As a result, after 102 years of burial, there were very few fragments of bone in this burial. There were 15 small fragments of skull; one could be identified as an occipital condyle, the other as part of the mastoid process, temporal bone and external auditory process (Figure 8). No other bones were recovered. Those that are present are consistent with the burial being that of a stillborn.

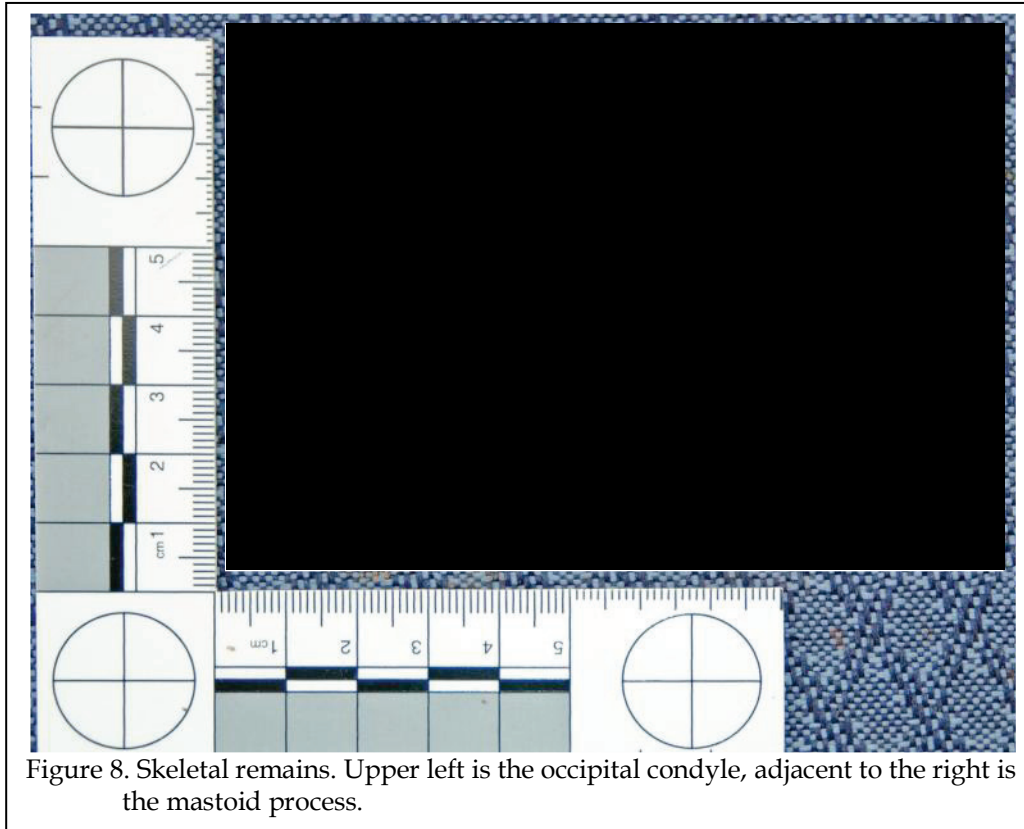


Figure 8. Skeletal remains. Upper left is the occipital condyle, adjacent to the right is the mastoid process.

While crushed, fragmented, and degraded, these remains were actually in far better condition than those previously recovered from infant burials. This is surprising considering the high water table, but it suggests that over the life of the burial conditions were generally fair to good for bone preservation.

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CONCLUSIONS

Chicora Foundation searched for two burials, including [REDACTED] an infant that died in 1949, and Baby Girl [REDACTED] a still born buried in 1908. Neither the Church nor Geils Funeral Home had records for these burials.

Oral history recounts [REDACTED] [REDACTED] being buried on top of the vault of their grandmother, [REDACTED] (1922-1944). While this vault was still undisturbed, the graves on both sides had already been removed. No evidence of the infant was identified in spite of careful stripping. An effort was made to identify the remains at the foot or on top of the vault - these efforts were also unsuccessful. While there were unused burial spaces in the family plot, the family chose to suspend efforts to find the infant.

In light of preservation elsewhere in this cemetery, it is implausible that remains buried for only 41 years would not leave any trace. Therefore, it is clear that the infant was not buried where reported by oral history. Since the plot had been previously disturbed and not all open areas were examined, we hold no opinion on whether the remains may have been or may still be elsewhere in the family plot. **Should the City of Chicago succeed in its efforts to take control of and remove the cemetery, we recommend that the remainder of the plot be examined prior to any "certification" that all remains have been identified and removed.**

The other infant, Baby Girl [REDACTED] was identified without incident, although the grave was waterlogged and excavation was exceedingly difficult. The grave was as deep as others identified in the cemetery. In spite of these conditions, the remains were well preserved for a stillborn, especially considering

the condition of other infants recovered elsewhere at St. Johannes.

Baby Girl [REDACTED] was buried in a wood casket enclosed by an outer box. Unlike other infant burials, this one exhibited a very plain casket, lacking decorations or handles. There was no indication of a fabric covering, but this may be the result of preservation conditions. The only hardware recovered was the latching mechanism. Nails were also present, likely from both the casket and the outer box.

These removals confirm previous evidence. The one identified grave outline was clearly defined below the A horizon soils. We continue to believe that the use of ground penetrating radar is an unnecessary expense. We also continue to believe that 6-8 hours per grave is sufficient for infants, with adults perhaps requiring 10-12 hours.

The burial provides additional information concerning the selection and use of burial receptacles and decorations by these rural German farmers. It would be of considerable interest to learn of the findings revealed by the Berger removals, but we have not been provided with that information nor does it appear to be accessible to researchers. The research at St. Johannes - if removal is required - provides an exceptional opportunity to study the bioanthropological status of a single, relatively small and isolated, population. We hope that the opportunity is not squandered and that any removals eventually required are sufficiently studied to allow the public a more complete understanding of their ancestors.

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