

Unearthed tombstones bring spirits of past alive at Langley

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Oct. 24, 2006 began with business as usual at Langley, as construction activities started bright and early in Langley's Lighter-than-Air housing area, where the installation of a new vacuum sewer system was taking place near some vacant housing units.

All of a sudden, the backhoe hit something hard and the contractors, expecting to see a piece of concrete or stone, were surprised by a far creepier find. It appeared they had just unearthed two gravestones.

Langley's contractual procedures for such unanticipated discoveries ran like clockwork from there. First, the contractors got in touch with the project inspector and project manager, and then the 1st Civil Engineer Squadron cultural resources manager, Laura Baie, intern Ryan Baie, and Air Combat Command's cultural resources program manager and archaeologist Dr. Paul Green were quickly summoned to the site.

Their intent was to visit the site and determine if the construction may have run across resources eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, perhaps even an unmarked cemetery.

The site eventually yielded four partial gravestones. One was marked W.H. Gould with a number 41, one marked A. Adkins with a number 111, another was marked D.E. Bowling marked 196 and one marked Unknown with a number 51.

It became evident that a past disturbance had likely relocated the stones from their original context, perhaps during the major period of construction that occurred in the LTA area in the mid 1930s. Evidence of the stones' secondary context was implied by their disoriented relationship, scattered around a trash-pit filled with glass, metal and brick and any lack of evidence of remains or grave pits.

Dr. Green identified additional evidence of construction debris in the area that could have come from the 20th century construction site. Upon making the determination that there were no additional resources within the vacuum sewer system's trenching path, the contractor was able to avoid the area where additional resources could be located and work continued away from the area of discovery.

For 1st CES personnel the next step was to notify the Virginia State Historic Preservation Office of the discovery, in accordance with Langley's Integrated Cultural Resources Management Plan and federal regulations, and undertake some research into the stones and the names marked on them.

Though there was no evidence of graves at the site, the cultural resources management team first reviewed old installation maps for cemeteries that might have been located on the property when the Government acquired it in 1916.

The maps showed no evidence of a cemetery in the discovery area and the numbers on the gravestones implied military graves. Additionally, there were no known military cemeteries on Langley. However, the first clue to the mystery was quickly found when history buffs and 1st CES staffers Dawn Young and Dan Porter did a genealogy search that identified the names on the stones as Civil War veterans buried at Hampton National Cemetery.

All of the names appeared on the rolls at the cemetery, with the numbers corresponding to a grave site. A visit to the cemetery confirmed that D.E. Bowling, A. Adkins, and W.H. Gould, as well as the Unknown Soldier, were all safely interred at the Hampton National Cemetery. All were Confederate soldiers, Bowling from Alabama; Adkins and Gould from Virginia.

An Internet search discovered that W.H. Gould, actually William Gould, was a private in the 18th Battalion, Virginia Heavy Artillery. Aetins M. Adkins, a private, was likely a member of the 13th Virginia Calvary.

Both Gould and Adkins died shortly after Appomattox, but it is unclear whether they died of war-related injuries. David E. Bolling (his last name was misspelled on his tombstone), was a private in the 10th Alabama Infantry, a regiment formed in Montgomery, Alabama. Bolling never made it to Appomattox as he died in June of 1864.

Now that the team had identified at least some of the individuals whose gravestones had surfaced at Langley and identified where their graves were actually located, the question remained as to how their gravestones had arrived at Langley.

A response to our inquiry with the ACC historian's office indicated that the stones were likely damaged and replaced at the Hampton National Cemetery, and that several of the damaged stones ended up at Langley and were used as stepping stones outside houses in the LTA area.

Similar stones had been found in the late 1980s in the LTA area. A talk with Hampton Department of Veterans Affairs Director H.D. Hardamon confirmed that discarded stones from the cemetery had been found all around Hampton over the years, often being reused as sidewalks and stepping stones.

So, at least in part, the mystery of the forgotten headstones at Langley AFB has been solved. Construction at the site can continue without fear of

disturbing the soul of some forgotten soldier. It's just another busy day at
Langley.