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Cemetery recovery complete at Sacred Heart's RiverBend campus

UO archaeologists find forgotten remains, 12 graves and artifacts on land of pioneering family

EUGENE, Ore. -- (Aug. 26, 2008) -- The mysteries unearthed in May at Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend have been solved-- mostly.

The University of Oregon's Museum of Natural and Cultural History conducted a small scale recovery excavation of 12 gravesites at Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend after a backhoe operator noticed what appeared to be a human bone in the soil.

Officials responded quickly and enlisted the help of UO archaeologists and others to carefully and responsibly examine and recover human and material remains. Recovered material initially included the nearly complete remains of an adult, as well as coffin wood and hardware -- primarily nails. But a survey of the surrounding area to determine if other archaeological materials might be present led to the discovery of additional gravesites. Many did not include remains, because they were previously opened and the contents were removed.

"The remains recovered in May were apparently missed during the initial disinterment more than 100 years ago," said Tom Connolly, director of research, UO Museum of Natural and Cultural History. "It appears that they were forgotten or missed when others were relocated to another cemetery. Once we determined the full extent of the recovered items, we turned our attention to identifying whose items we'd found."

An examination of historic records revealed that the RiverBend site is located within the pioneering land claim of William M. Stevens. In 1847, Stevens, his wife and the couple's 10 children traveled from Missouri to Oregon in a covered wagon before settling on a 640-acre land claim near the McKenzie River. Only two other settlers lived in the area at the time -- Eugene Skinner, the founder of Eugene City, and Elijah Bristow of Pleasant Hill.

Stevens is considered to be the first American settler in the area now occupied by the City of Springfield. In 1860, Stevens died in a farm accident. He was not the first to be buried in the family cemetery however. A daughter, the family's 11th child and the only to be born in Oregon, died in 1854 just shy of her 5th birthday and may have been the first to be placed in the family cemetery. By the mid 1880s, a dozen family members had been interred in the family plot.

By the turn of the 20th century, the Stevens homestead had been divided among family members and resold multiple times. A newspaper story indicated that in 1901 the family removed eight burial remains and moved them to another cemetery.

The recovered human remains are being examined and documented. According to Connolly, the analysis will be non-invasive and non-destructive. Once completed, the remains will be placed in the Gillespie Cemetery along with the other family members.

"The recovered remains include that of an adult male, two children younger than age ten, and an infant," Connolly said. "We continue to work on identification of the remains."

Artifacts recovered from the site include clothing items and coffin hardware thought to belong to the Stevens family. The clothing items included a cloth-covered metal button, white Prosser four-hole buttons (common from 1840 to the early 1900s), a suspender buckle and a ring. Other items included a pair of brass single-lug swingbail handles decorated with Masonic emblems, coffin handles with a patent date in 1874, white metal slotted-head coffin screws and ornamental tacks.

Kuri Gill, coordinator of the Historic Cemeteries Program of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's Heritage Programs, presented backhoe operator Erica French with a certificate of recognition for her conscientious action following the initial discovery. The certificate is the first of its type awarded by Heritage Programs and will become a regular feature in future projects, Gill said.

"French's actions in noticing the potential burial site and immediately stopping work at the location exemplify the kind of stewardship Heritage Programs encourages and expects from all Oregonians," Gill said.

Heritage Programs of Oregon Parks and Recreation Department includes the Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries, the Oregon Heritage Commission, the Oregon Historic Trails Advisory Council and the State Historic Preservation Office.

Philip Farrington, director of land use planning and development of PeaceHealth Oregon Region, said the hospital was pleased with the cooperation and professionalism displayed during the discovery and recovery process.

"Since the discovery, PeaceHealth has been working collaboratively with several different partners, including state agencies, the University of Oregon and descendants of the Stevens family, to

recover the remains in a timely and respectful manner so they may be properly interred alongside the other members of this pioneer family," Farrington said.

About the University of Oregon

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Links: Museum of Natural and Cultural History: <http://natural-history.uoregon.edu/index.html>;
Heritage Programs of Oregon Parks and Recreation: <http://www.oregonheritage.org>; PeaceHealth Oregon Region: <http://www.peacehealth.org/Oregon/>

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