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Sarahville de Viesca (41FA86) Cemetery Search, Falls County, Texas

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By

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Antiquities Code of Texas
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Contents

Management Summary (Abstract)

The search for the 1830s Sarahville de Viesca cemetery took place in Falls County, Texas, located about 10 km southwest of Marlin, Texas (Appendix A). The project was sponsored by the Summerlee Foundation of Dallas. One of the foundation's purposes is to investigate and preserve Texas history. In 2006 the foundation purchased land that contained the Sarahville de Viesca site and a cemetery called Bull Hill to preserve these sites and make them available for research. As part of this mission, the Summerlee Foundation asked the Texas Historical Commission (THC) to investigate the Bull Hill cemetery (41FA86). The THC investigated the cemetery from 2008 into 2011, under the direction of Dr. James Bruseth, then director of the Archeology Division of the THC.

The Bull Hill cemetery was the burial place for former enslaved workers at the nearby Jones Plantation and for the descendants of the enslaved workers. During the recordation process, information was found that indicated the 1837 burial site of James Coryell, a Texas Ranger stationed at the settlement, was located immediately south of the Bull Hill cemetery. In 2010 the burial site was found a few meters south of the cemetery, and excavation of the grave took place later that year and again in 2011 by the THC.

The project reported in this document is an effort to search for additional graves associated with the 1830s Sarahville community around the location of the Coryell burial site. Fieldwork for the project took place from August 22 to 24, 2019. The project area was a .0676 ha area around the Coryell gravesite. The effort was directed by Principal Investigator James Bruseth, and assisted by staff of the THC, including Bradford Jones, Rebecca Shelton, and Arlo

McKee. Additional help was given by THC Commissioner John Crain, Dallas resident Gwyneth Gravelle, and Summerlee Foundation President Gary Smith. A total of 98 person-hours of time were spend on the fieldwork.

The working hypothesis for the project was that Coryell was buried at this location because it was the cemetery for the nearby settlement of Sarahville de Viesca (1834-1838) capital of the Roberston Colony of Texas. Specifically, the goal was to investigate shallow surface depressions around the Coryell grave to see if grave shafts could be found beneath them. Three depressions were selected, and .75 cm by 1.5 m units were placed over each depression and excavated to about 30 cm. Grave shafts were found in two of the three units, confirming that Coryell's grave was part of a larger burial complex. The excavations in the three units did not recover any artifacts. Records and photographs are curated at the THC.

The results indicate that the Sarahville de Viesca town cemetery was indeed located here. When the Jones Plantation was established in the area in 1850, the enslaved workers at the plantation were allowed to continue using the Sarahville cemetery as their burial place. The cemetery became known by the name Bull Hill.

Background Information

By James E. Bruseth and Bradford M. Jones

This report describes work under Antiquities Permit Number 9029 to search for graves associated with the Sarahville de Viesca townsite, located in the Post Oak Savannah region of Central Texas (see Appendix A). This area consists of low, forested rolling hills interspersed by small open grass prairies.

The settlement was founded in 1834 by Sterling C. Robertson, the empresario of the Robertson's Colony in Texas. The town served as the focal point and location of military protection for the colony. Fort Milam was built at Sarahville to house Texas Rangers and provide protection for the approximately 200 settlers who resided there. The settlement was abandoned in 1838.

During the summer of 2010, John Crain, then President of the Summerlee Foundation of Dallas, was supervising a crew of workers preparing to build a fence around an African American cemetery named Bull Hill (41FA86 and a State Antiquities Landmark) on the foundation's property in Falls County, Texas (Figure 1). The cemetery is located about 700 m due west of Sarahville and had been the burial place for enslaved workers from the nearby Jones Plantation dating to 1850. Burial continued in the cemetery until the 1960s (Lee and Bruseth 2008).

The foundation planned to build the fence around the African American cemetery to protect it and to keep grazing livestock from damaging headstones and other grave markers. The fencing perimeter was planned to be larger than the current location of headstones to protect any unmarked graves that might be present beyond the visible grave markers. Crain was aware of an account by a former plantation enslaved worker, Ned Broadus (Simmons 1936), who stated that James Coryell's grave was located to the south of the enslaved workers' cemetery and a pile of rocks had been placed on it when it caved in after a few years.

Coryell was a Texas Ranger stationed at Fort Milam who had been shot and scalped by Caddo Indians a short distance from Sarahville; he died a few days later in May of 1837. Based on the account by Broadus, Crain was on the lookout for a rock pile during the clearing for the fence. Indeed, a pile of rocks was found after vegetation was removed for the southern boundary

of the fence (Figure 2). As the stones measured 15 to more than 25 cm in length and no naturally occurring stone of this size exists in the immediate area, Crain believed the area warranted further investigation.

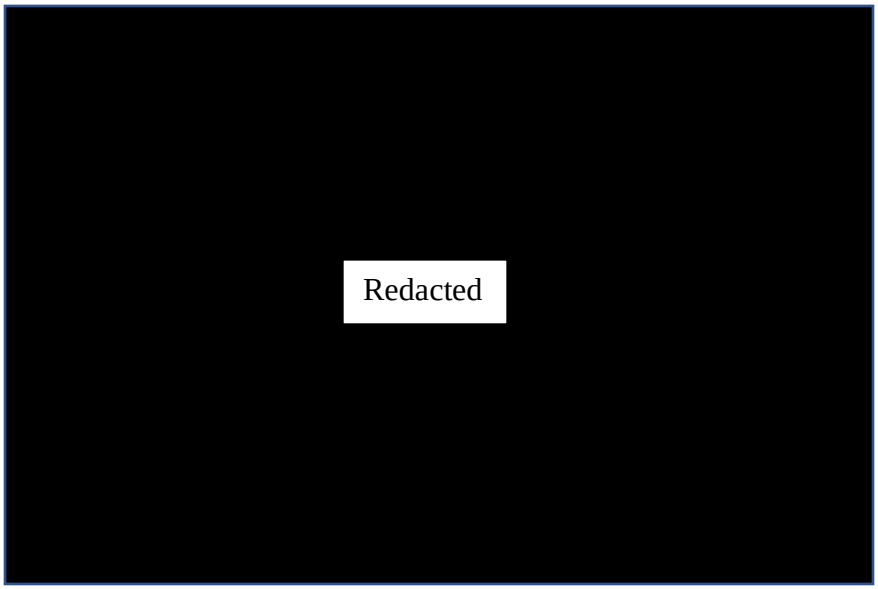

Figure 1. Location of possible gravesite of James Coryell, Falls County, Texas.

The Texas Historical Commission (THC) was contacted and conducted fieldwork to investigate the rock pile in two phases. The first phase occurred during December 9 through 11, 2010, with the goal of determining if a grave shaft existed below the rock pile, and if so, excavating down to confirm the presence and degree of preserved human remains. The second phase of fieldwork occurred from February 8 through 14, 2011. The goal of this work was to expose any human remains and associated artifacts, map and photograph the remains, and conduct in-field forensic anthropological examination of the remains. This latter work was to be assisted by Dr. Douglas Owsley and Kari Bruwelheid of the Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 2. Rock pile found during the clearing of the cemetery fence.

The first phase of fieldwork began by clearing vegetation over and around the rock pile. Once this was accomplished, an area measuring 3 m by 3 m was hand-excavated down to 30 cm, leaving the rocks pedestaled. The intention was to see if a grave shaft could be detected before additional effort was spent to record the rocks in detail and remove them. At this point, it was uncertain if the rocks marked the location of a grave or were a random discard of debris. After two days of effort, portions of the outline of a grave shaft were clearly visible: a mottled brown sandy loam and an orange clay were observed in a rectangular shape measuring 1.98 m in length and 55 to 65 cm in width (Figure 3). The original digging of the grave went through the upper 30 to 40 cm of sandy loam A horizon and then dug through the sandy clay substrate B horizon.

Filling of the grave after interment mixed the two soil types, causing the mottled soil color visible in the shaft outline.

Once the grave shaft had been confirmed, the rocks were mapped, photographed, and removed (Figure 4). Then any soil beneath the rocks was excavated to complete the 3 m by 3 m unit to the depth of 30 cm.

Figure 3. Photograph of the grave shaft beneath the rock pile, looking south.

The next objective was to excavate inside the grave shaft to encounter human remains and to assess their preservation. It was hoped that sufficient bone material would be present to allow for DNA analysis. In fact, a maternal descendant of James Coryell, Ms. Ara Ogden, had been located in Missouri who agreed to provide a DNA sample.

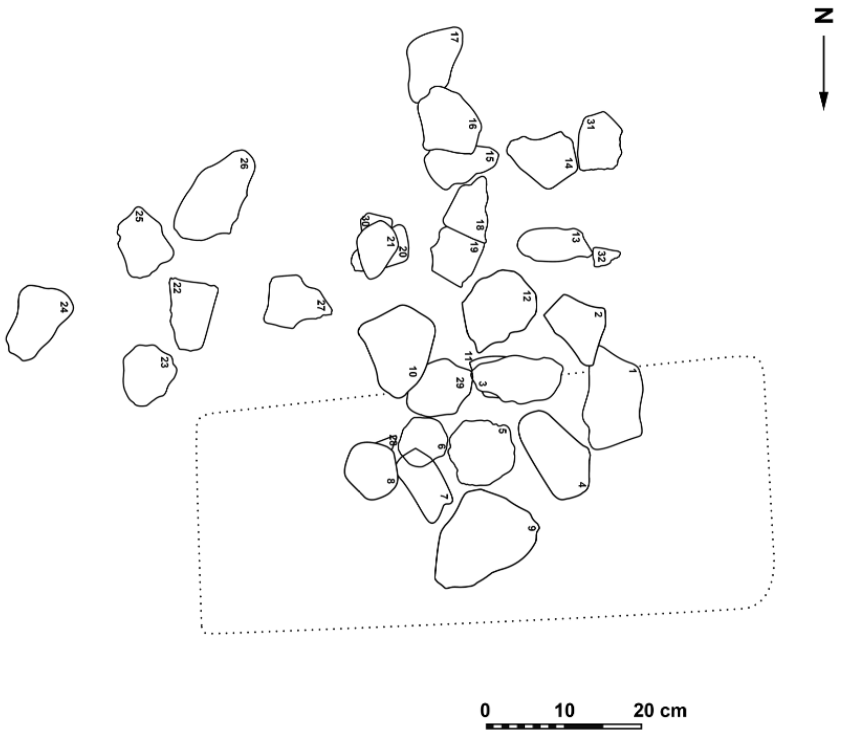

Figure 4. Illustration of the layout of rocks (numbered objects) over the top of the grave shaft (dashed line). Image is oriented to the south to match the orientation of Figure 3. Illustration by Amy Borgens.

Excavation was undertaken in the western end of the grave shaft and done carefully with a trowel so that if human remains were encountered, they would not be impacted. This work took place over three days. As the excavation continued, it became difficult to hand-trowel at the increasingly deepening excavation area. Consequently, the eastern half of the grave shaft was excavated down another 50 cm, allowing the excavators easier access to deepen the western half of the grave shaft. At 1.55 m human bone was encountered, appearing to be the poorly preserved portions of a cranium. A black substance was found over the crown of the cranium and thought to possibly be related to the bandaging of the scalping wound of Coryell. Fieldwork ceased at

this point, the exposed remains were covered and protected, and the excavated area was filled back in.

The second phase of fieldwork occurred two months later, after Stanley Coryell, a descendant of James Coryell, authorized a Texas District Court order to exhume the body. The first step in this work was to excavate a deeper area to the south of the grave shaft in the 3 m by 3 m unit to facilitate later excavation of the grave. This area measured approximately 2.25 m east-west and 1.5 m north-south and was excavated down 1 m using a backhoe. The purpose of this soil removal was to provide a deepened platform and safe working area adjacent to the grave shaft to prevent the excavators from having to lean down into a 1.5 m or deeper excavation of the grave (Figure 5).

Once the working area was prepared, focus shifted to excavating the grave shaft. Soil was removed by trowel in 20-cm layers and screened through 1/8-inch (3.18 mm) hardware mesh. The bottom of each layer was carefully troweled for signs of human remains or other artifacts, such as coffin nails. At about 1.45 m below the ground surface, evidence of the coffin was found in the form of highly oxidized nails. Further excavation showed the nails to outline the sides of a coffin. The excavation culminated with the full exposure of the human remains of a single individual oriented with head to the west. Unfortunately, the remains were found to be poorly preserved, confirming the initial findings during the December 2010 excavation. Due to the poor preservation, the remains were exposed and pedestaled, but left in place to permit in-situ forensic anthropological investigations by Owsley and Bruwelheid. The remains were carefully mapped, and photogrammetric and SfM digital modeling were undertaken to provide high-resolution images of the remains and associated artifacts (Figure 6). This work was conducted

Figure 5. Workers (lower left to upper right: John Crain, Pat Mercado-Allinger, and Gwyneth Gravelle) in deepened area excavating the grave.

on two separate occasions, first by John Campbell of Texas State University, and later by Mark Willis, an independent researcher.

In addition to the human skeletal remains, 126 iron nails or nail fragments, 79 small flat pieces of iron from undetermined objects (most probably nail fragments), six small brass fragments, a single piece of possible coffin wood, and four glass and six bone buttons were recovered. Figure 7 shows the locations of the artifacts described below, illustrating their spatial patterning and contextual associations within the grave. The human remains are from a Caucasian male and are believed to be the burial of James Coryell (hereafter referred to as "Coryell gravesite"). A full report, including detailed forensic anthropological analysis, is in preparation.

Figure 6. SfM digital model image of the grave and remains (image by Mark Willis).

During February of 2019, an additional surface examination of the gravesite location was undertaken by staff and Commissioners from the THC and by staff from the Smithsonian Institution. At that time, several shallow depressions in the ground surface around the Coryell gravesite were noted. In addition, an isolated stone, very much like the ones used to cover the gravesite, was observed a few meters to the north of the gravesite. The depressions and the stone led to the development of a hypothesis that they may represent the locations of other graves and that the Coryell gravesite was placed in an already existing cemetery. The possibility of the surface depressions representing additional graves was supported by examination of nearby cemeteries with unmarked graves that showed shallow surface depressions identical in appearance to those around the Coryell gravesite.

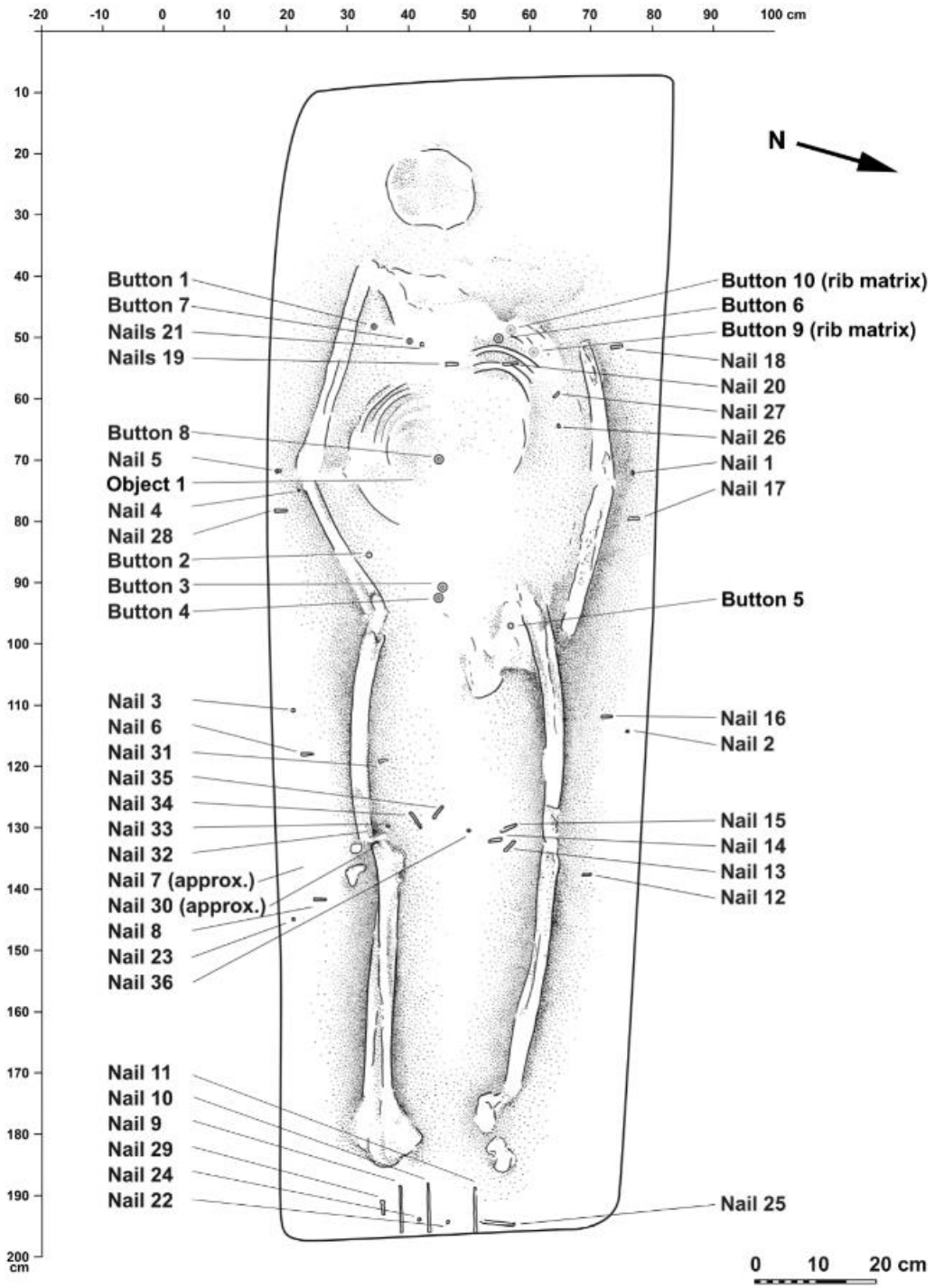

Figure 7. Field drawing of the skeletal remains and associated artifacts (illustration by Amy Borgens).

According to this hypothesis, James Coryell would have been interred in the burial ground for the Sarahville residents. When the Jones Plantation was built some 12 years after the abandonment of Sarahville, wooden markers likely would have still existed for many of the burials. This would be how Ned Broadus knew that James Coryell was buried there. Furthermore, according to this hypothesis, the Jones Plantation owner would have allowed the enslaved workers to bury their dead in this location, since the existing Anglo cemetery made the area unsuitable for other purposes, such as cultivation.

Figure 8 is a map of the location of markers for the Bull Hill cemetery, based on field survey work done in 2008 by the THC (Lee and Bruseth 2008). The location of the African American graves occurs to the north and west of the area circled in blue, suggesting that the enslaved workers and later African Americans were burying adjacent to the area here proposed to be the Sarahville cemetery. Number 03 in Figure 8 is the location of the isolated rock near the Coryell gravesite as mentioned above.

Research Goals

Fieldwork performed for this permit was to identify three depressions near the Coryell gravesite and to excavate short north-trenches across each depression. As the graves, based on the Coryell gravesite, are likely to be oriented east-west with the head to the west, placing the units north-south across the mid-point of the depressions was considered optimal for identifying grave shafts that might be present. Each unit was to measure .75 m east-west and 1.5 m north-south; two of the three units were ultimately enlarged, as explained below. The unit fill was to be excavated down to about 30 to 40 cm to see if burial shafts were observable.

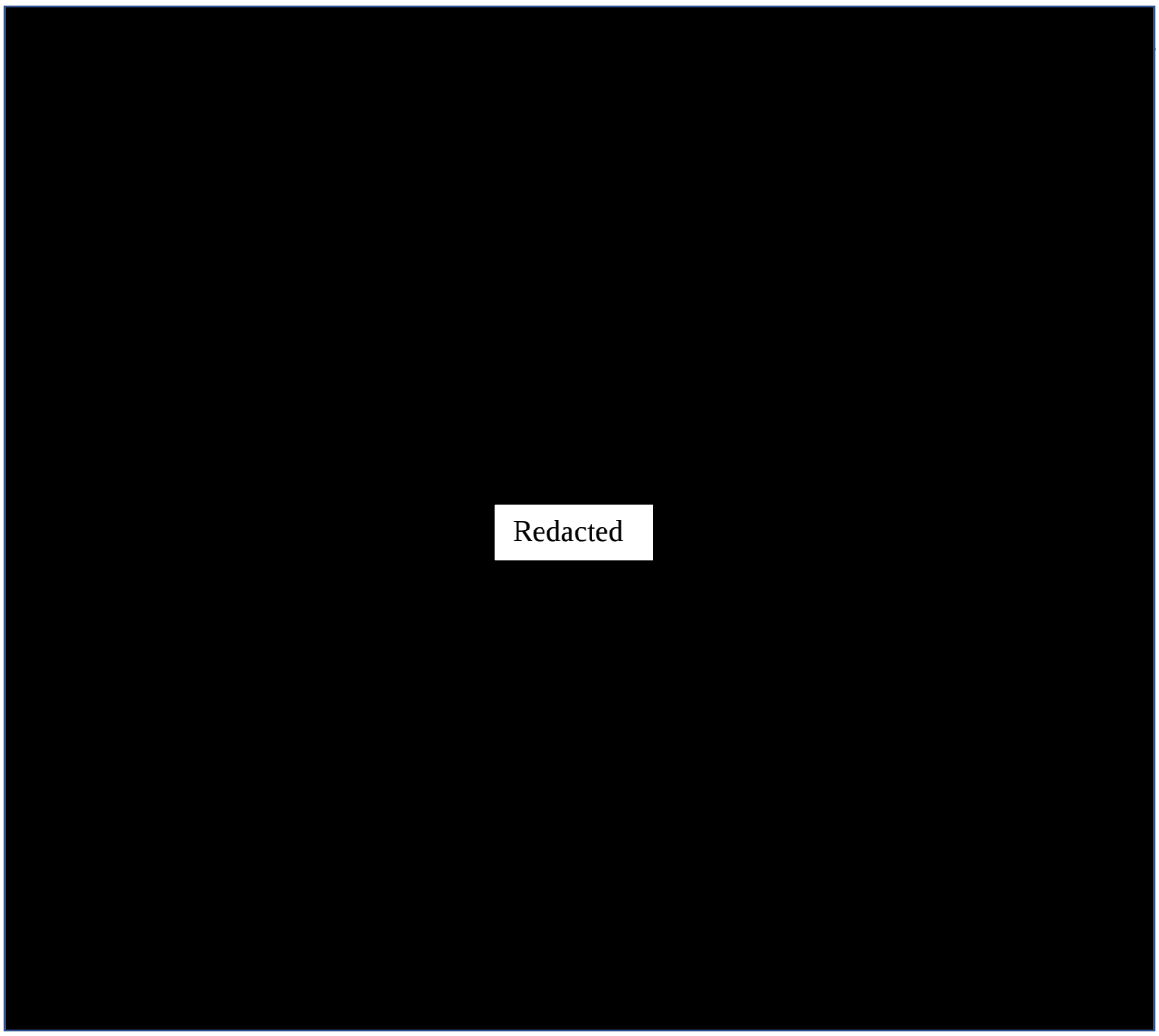

Figure 8. Location of marked grave locations at the Bull Hill cemetery (modified from Lee and Bruseth 2008). Red dot is the location of the Coryell gravesite; the blue line is the suspected location of the Sarahville cemetery.

As noted earlier, the site soil consists of an upper sandy loam about 30 cm deep (A horizon) over a sandy clay substrate (B horizon). When graves were dug, they cut through both soil zones, and when re-filled, mixed the two soils, creating the mottled grave fill identified in

Figure 3. As excavation was not planned to proceed deeply enough to encounter human remains or artifacts (based on the Coryell gravesite where coffin nails were found at about 1.45 m), no artifacts or human remains were expected to be encountered. Excavations were planned to be just be deep enough to identify burial shafts and then cease.

The fieldwork was planned for August 22 through August 24, 2019 by staff and Commissioners of the THC and with Gary Smith, President of the Summerlee Foundation of Dallas. When complete, the area was to be mapped, the excavation units backfilled, and a report prepared.

Fieldwork Results

Fieldwork commenced on the afternoon of August 22, 2019 when three units, measuring 75 cm east-west by 1.5 m north-south, were laid out over three shallow surface depressions noted near the Coryell gravesite (Figures 9 and 10). Excavation began the following day. Details on the excavation units is presented below. As anticipated, no artifacts were encountered during excavation of any of the units.

Unit C1

The unit was initially taken down 20 cm looking for evidence of a grave shaft. No screening of soil was undertaken, as no artifacts were anticipated to be present until depths of 1.45 m or more based on the Coryell grave site. At between 15 and 20 cm, mottled sandy loam soil (10YR4/3) began appearing in the middle part of the unit, about where a grave shaft was expected. The soil was a darker sandy loam (10YR6/3) compared to the soil in the remainder of

the unit. At the bottom of the 20 cm level, an east-west oriented grave shaft was apparent (Figure 11). Another 10 cm level was excavated to better define the grave shaft, and at this depth the fill consisted of sandy loam (10YR4/3) and clay soil (7.5YR6/6), indication a mixture of the A and B horizons from the digging and refilling of the grave. At this level, 30 cm below the surface, the unit measured 67.5 cm east-west and 1.45 m north-south, slightly less than as started.

The unit was left open at the end of the day, and water was poured in to soak the soil. While the grave shaft was very distinct, the soil was very dry and increased soil moisture would help with photography that was to occur the next day. Photographs and plan and profile drawings were made on August 24.

The exposed portion of the grave measured 74 cm east-west and between 45 and 49 cm north-south. The 74 cm observed length is believed to be slightly more than a third of the entire length of the shaft, based on the Coryell grave. Thus, the grave extends as much as another 1.26 m to the east or west. The solar declination of the grave is -24 degrees, indicating burial a few days before or after the winter solstice, based on the grave being oriented to the setting sun (https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/grad/solcalc/azel.html).

Unit C2

This unit was excavated over a shallow surface depression in much the same way as C1. The unit was initially taken down 20 cm, looking for evidence of a grave shaft. No screening of soil was undertaken, as no artifacts were anticipated to be encountered. At 10 cm clay soil (7.5YR6/6) began appearing across the middle and southern portions of the unit, indicating the

mixture of soil from the deeper clay substrate with the upper A horizon (Figure 12). As the mixed soil was occurring in the southern part of the unit as well, an extension of 40 cm was made to the southern end to better define the grave. The entire unit now measured 75 cm by 1.9 m. The southern part of the unit was taken down another 10 cm level leaving the grave shaft pedestaled. At this point an east-west oriented grave shaft became very clear. As with the grave shaft in Unit C1, the grave fill was a mixture of sandy loam from the A horizon and clay from the B horizon. The bottom of the unit measured 72.5 cm east-west and 1.87 m north-south, slightly smaller than as started at the surface.

The unit was left open at the end of the day, and water was poured in to soak the soil. While the grave shaft was very distinct, the soil was very dry and increased soil moisture would help with photography that was to occur the next day. Photographs were taken and plan and profile drawings were made on August 24.

The exposed portion of the grave measured 73 cm east-west and about 75 cm north-south. The 73 cm observed length is believed to be slightly more than a third of the entire length of the shaft, based on the Coryell grave. Thus, the grave extends as much as another 1.26 m to the east or west. The north-south measurement, or width, of the grave is larger than the graves in C1 (45 to 49 cm) and the Coryell excavation (55 to 65 cm). The solar declination of the grave is 4 degrees, indicating burial around the middle of September.

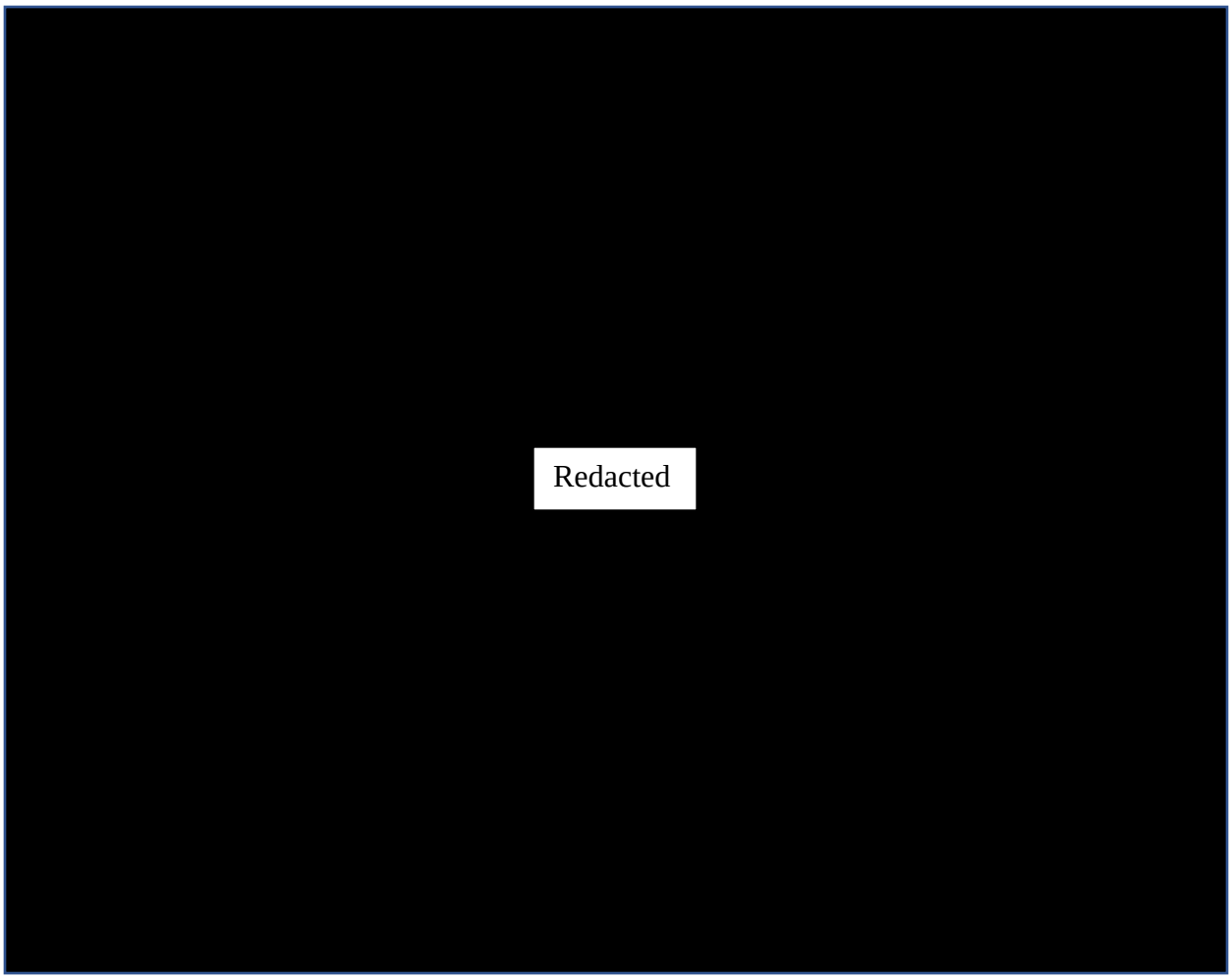

Figure 9. Bull Hill cemetery with locations of grave markers (black dots with numbers). See Lee and Bruseth (2008) for details on the grave markers and the remote sensing identified in the figure. Blue line is the current State Antiquities Landmark outline. The area investigated for this report is outlined in red; this area is also shown in Figure 10 and in Appendix A.

Unit C3

This unit was placed over another shallow surface depression noted to the west of the Coryell gravesite. The 75 cm by 1.5 m unit was taken down the initial 20 cm level and no evidence of a grave shaft was noted (Figure 13). Two extensions were excavated in the event that the unit just missed a grave shaft. The first extension (A) was a 60-cm addition to the northern edge of the unit, which was taken down to 30 cm. No grave shaft was observed. Next, a portion of the unit was extended 30 cm to the west along the middle of the western wall

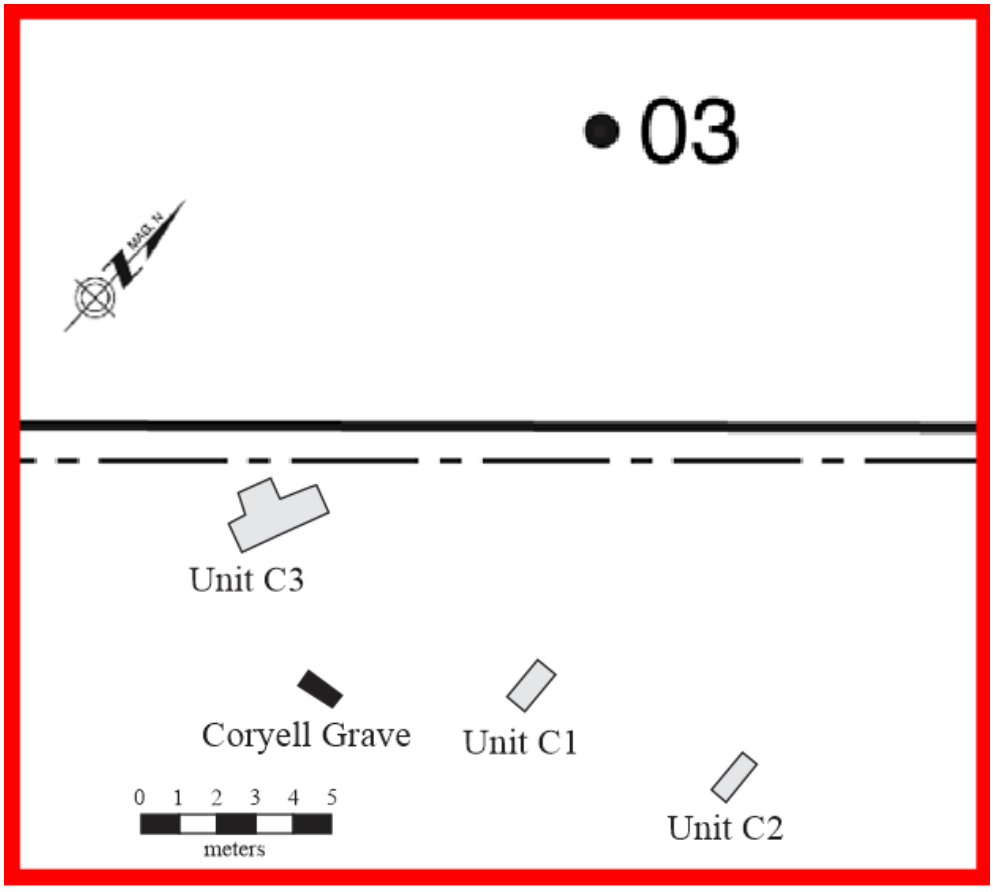

Figure 10. Close-up of the area investigated for this report (see Figure 9) showing the Coryell gravesite and test unit locations.

(Extension B). This area was excavated down 30 cm. Still no grave shaft was observed. At this point, the unit was discontinued, and the decision was made that the surface depression was not related to a grave shaft. Rather, it is likely related to a tree being uprooted sometime in the past.

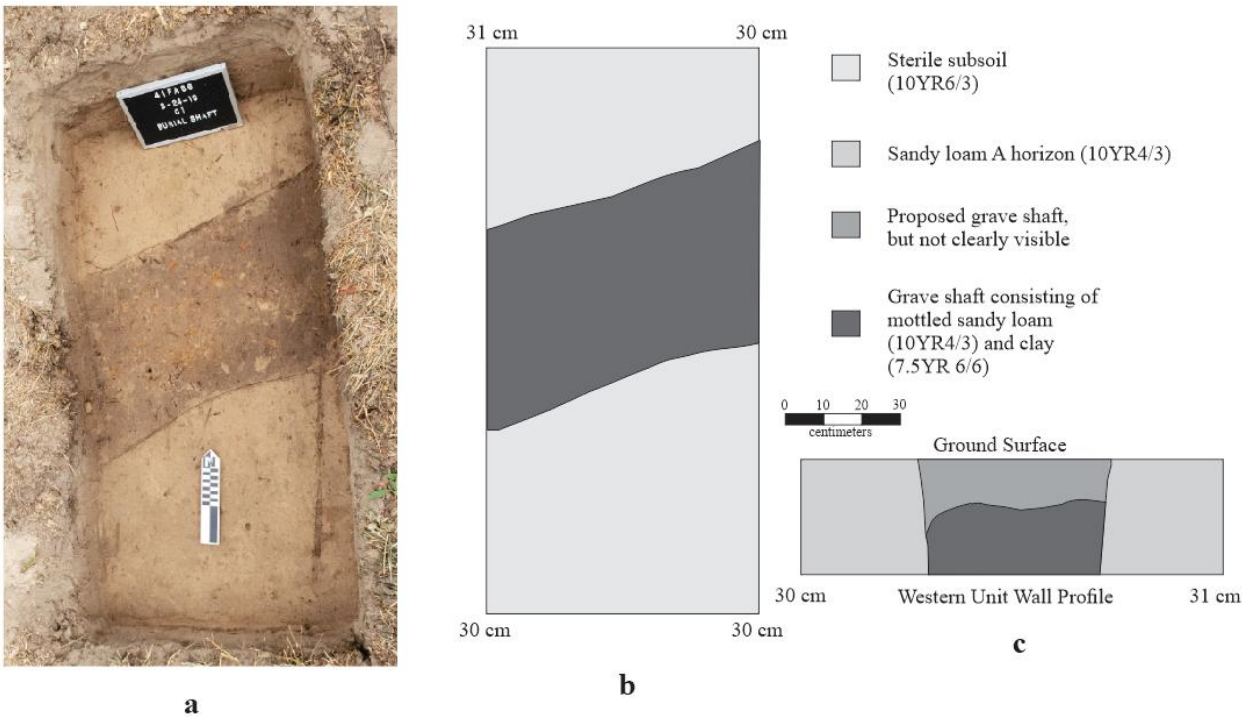

Figure 11. Unit C1: (a) photograph at slight oblique angle; (b) plan view drawing; and (c) western wall profile. Numbers at corners of the unit drawings represent the depth of excavation below ground surface.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The fieldwork was successful in demonstrating that there are other graves near the Coryell gravesite. Two were found based on the limited excavation of three surface depressions,

and several more depressions exist in the area. This evidence supports the hypothesis that Coryell was buried into an existing cemetery after his death in 1837. Undoubtedly, the cemetery was the burial place for residents of Sarahville de Viesca.

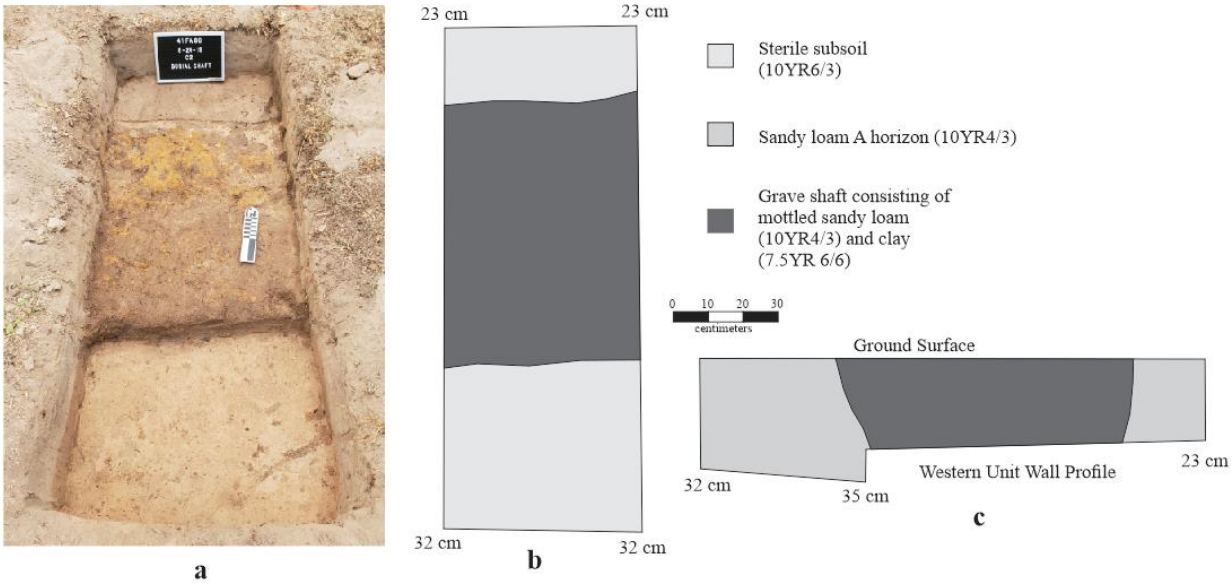

Figure 12. Unit C2: (a) photograph at an oblique angle; (b) plan view drawing; and (c) western wall profile. Numbers at corners of the unit drawings represent the depth of excavation below ground surface.

At the time of the fieldwork conducted for this project, the entire area within the boundary of the fence that was erected in 2010 had been cleared of underbrush. Significantly, this allowed the cemetery landform to be more clearly viewed and to observe that a slight rise in topography existed in this area. The apex of the higher elevation is precisely where the Coryell gravesite and other two grave shafts reported here are located. This slightly higher topography may explain the "Hill" part in the Bull Hill cemetery name. It appears that the Sarahville

inhabitants selected this location for their burial of the deceased because of the slight rise in elevation. Where the

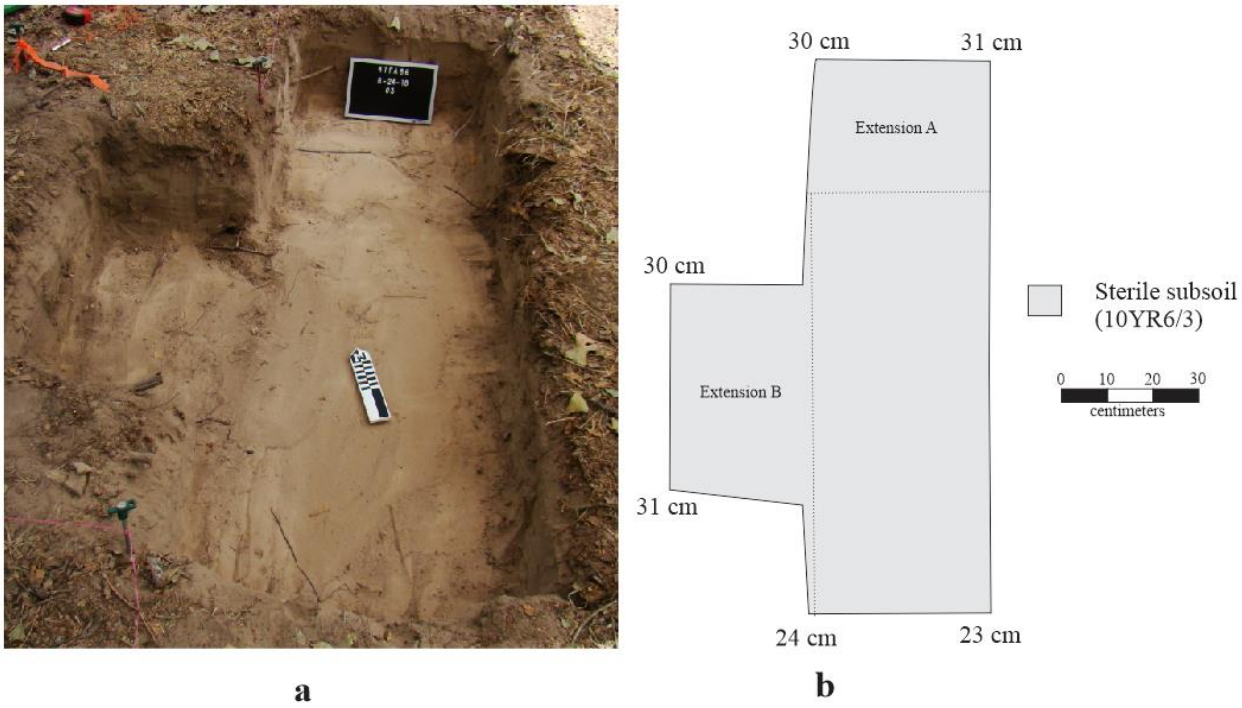

Figure 13. Unit C3: (a) photograph at an oblique angle and (b) plan view drawing. Numbers at corners of the unit drawings represent the depth of excavation below ground surface.

"Bull" part of the name comes from is unknown; perhaps it relates to the presence of bison in the area at the time, but this is speculation at present.

The presence of the Sarahville cemetery also supports the hypothesis that the enslaved workers from the Jones Plantation were given the area around the Sarahville cemetery to bury their dead. The presence of an existing cemetery here made the area unsuitable for cultivation,

and the enslaved workers were allowed to bury their dead to the west and north of the original cemetery. This burial pattern continued by the descendants of the original enslaved people until the 1960s.

Based on this and previous field work at the Bull Hill cemetery including the Sarahville portion, the site is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. In addition, the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory site form should be updated to include information on the Sarahville cemetery portion, including expanding the site boundary based on information presented in Appendix B. Finally, the State Antiquities Landmark (SAL) boundary needs to be updated to reflect the expanded size of the cemetery, which is the combined outlines of the current SAL boundary and the area investigated for this report (see Figure 9; shapefile has been submitted with this report to the Texas Historical Commission).

The site is not in danger of any impacts or other disturbance. It is on land owned by the Summerlee Foundation and will be protected in perpetuity. Further work at the cemetery is recommended. This would be to expose a much larger area with heavy machinery, such as a Gradall tractor, by removing the topsoil and recording all of the graves associated with the Sarahville cemetery. As the grave shafts show up clearly at about 30 cm in depth, finding the limits of the original cemetery should be a relatively easy task. This work should be done when soil moisture is optimum, so features can be seen most easily; this would mean work during the fall, winter, or spring when rainfall is more common. The goal of this effort would be to determine the limits and the number of interments in the Sarahville cemetery.

Acknowledgements

Bradford Jones, Rebecca Shelton, and Arlo McKee of the THC helped with the fieldwork and subsequent report preparation. In particular, Ms. Shelton made important plan and profile maps of the units and the overall site that have been used to produce the final illustrations in this report. Mr. McKee provided shapefile maps of the Bull cemetery and the SAL boundary for the cemetery nomination. Additional help was given by THC Commissioner John Crain, Dallas resident Gwyneth Gravelle, and Summerlee Foundation President Gary Smith. I thank all of these individuals for their great contributions. Roland Pantermuehl prepared Figure 1, and Amy Borgens prepared the illustrations for Figures 3 and 7.

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Appendix A: USGS Topographic Map Showing the Project Area for Antiquities Permit Number 9029 on Cedar Springs, Texas, USGS Topographic Map

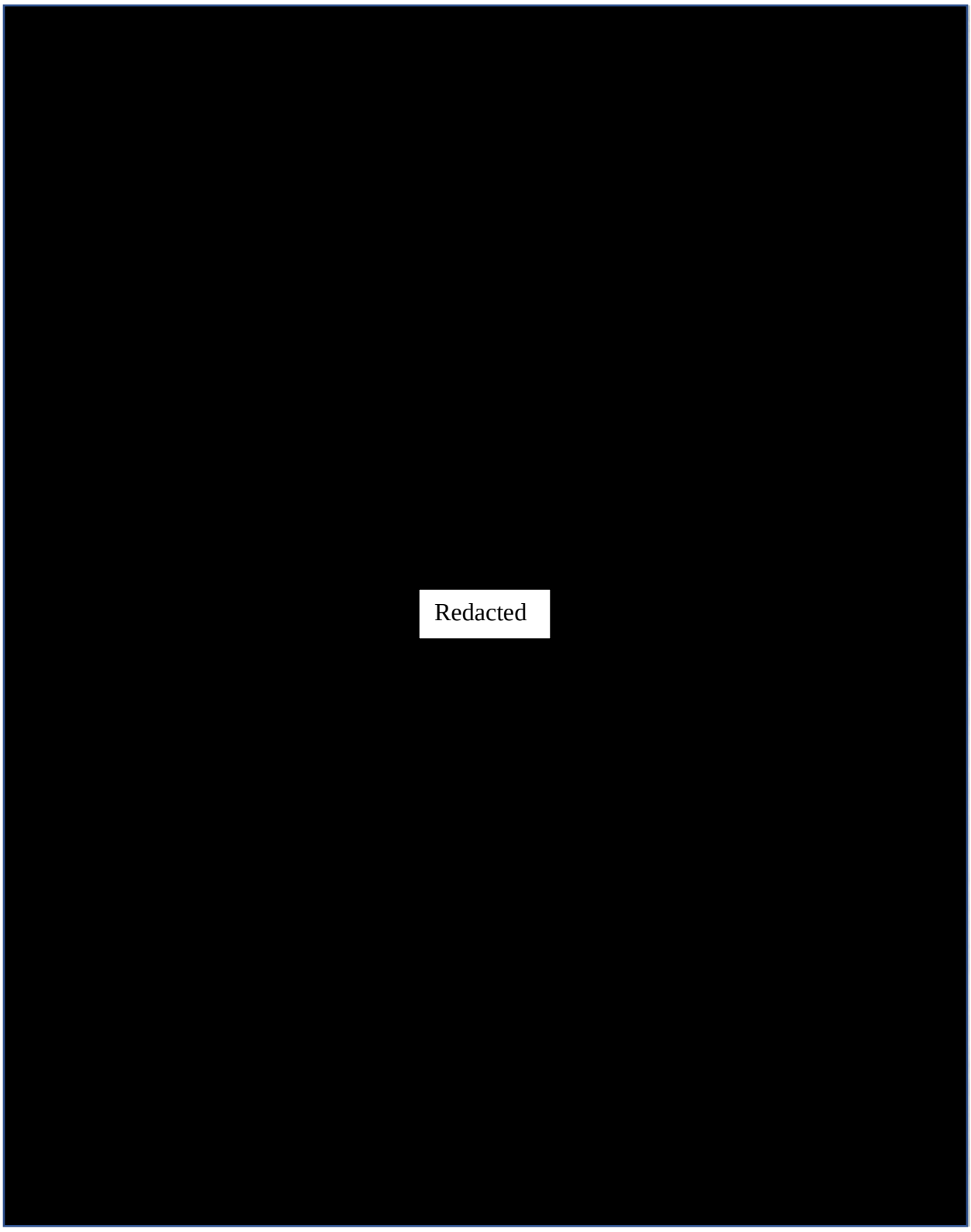

Figure A-1. Sarahville Cedar Springs, Texas, USGS Topographical Map.

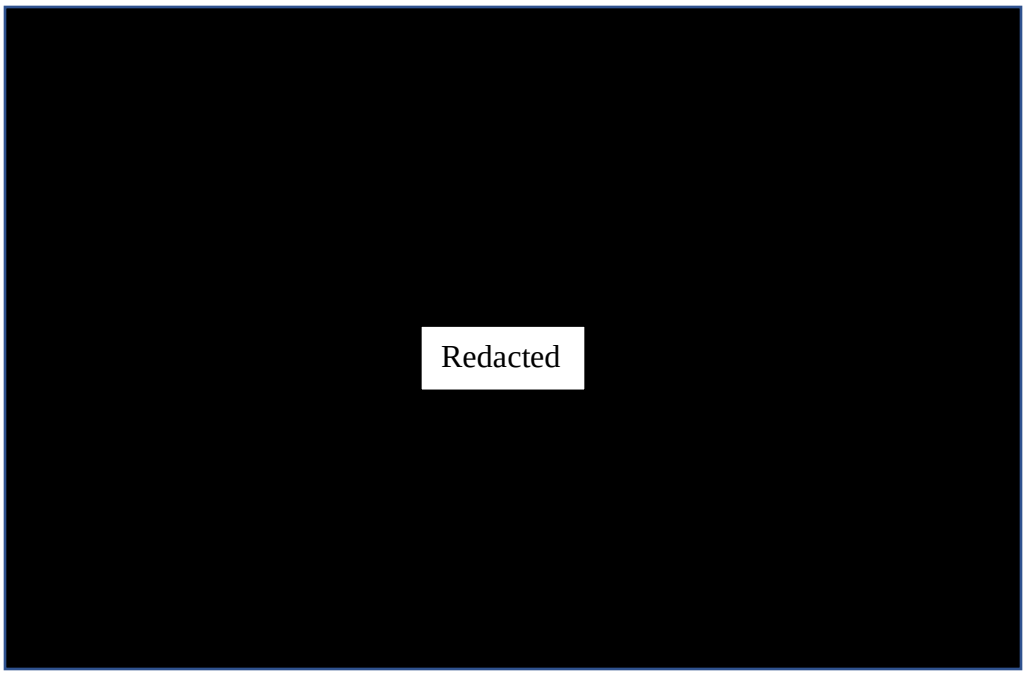

Figure A-2. Close-up of Project Area (Red Square) on Cedar Springs, Texas, USGS Topographical Map.