

## 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Investigation

### Proposed Test Excavations and Additional Geophysical Survey at Oaklawn Cemetery

#### Presented to the Public Oversight Committee for Consideration

February 3, 2020

##### *Test Excavations in the Sexton Area*

The recent geophysical survey completed by Oklahoma Archeological Survey (OAS) at Oaklawn Cemetery revealed a rather large anomaly in the Sexton Area (Hammerstedt and Regnier 2019:20-23). The size, location, and orientation of this anomaly, paired with oral history accounts, lead the Physical Investigation Committee to recommend that test excavations at this location are warranted to ascertain if it represents a mass grave—perhaps associated with the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The goals of this testing are to: 1) establish the presence or absence of human remains; 2) determine the nature of the interments (if present); and 3) obtain data to help inform the ensuing steps in the investigation—including appropriate recovery efforts.

We do not propose to exhume any human remains during this phase of the investigation. However, any human remains that are uncovered during excavation will be treated respectfully and with reverence. While it is not our intention to conduct exhumations at this time, excavations may only proceed once the appropriate medicolegal documentation has been obtained.

The limited excavations proposed at this time will involve the following steps:

- Accommodations will be made to allow safe observation of this phase of the investigation by interested members of the Public Oversight Committee. Further, accommodation will be made to honor requests for ceremonies, prayers, or similar observations that do not otherwise impede the investigation.
- Media access will be coordinated with the City.
- The City will attempt to notify family members of individuals who are interred near the proposed excavation area.
- An area that measures no more than 8x8 feet near the center at the base of the geophysical anomaly will be exposed to determine if human remains are present.
- Mechanical excavation will be employed to slowly and carefully remove the top layers of soil over the targeted excavation area. Then, excavation will continue by hand.
- All mechanical excavations will be closely monitored by 2-3 qualified archaeologists and/or forensic anthropologists.
- Hand-excavations will be completed by a team of 8-10 professional forensic anthropologists and/or archaeologists.
- Hand-excavated fill will be removed from the excavation area by bucket and screened through ¼-inch mesh; some will be sifted through finer screens to facilitate recovery of smaller items if necessary. Screening of the fill dirt will take place on the ground surface adjacent to the excavation block.
- If burials are present, we will expose the remains adequately to assess: the minimum number of individuals (MNI) in the excavation area; contextual clues for the burial(s); extent to which people

were interred in containers (or not); and maintain a state of preservation. Other observations may be made depending on the condition of the remains.

- Based on the results of the geophysical data, we do not see clear indications of an intrusive burial(s) in the intermediate area between the ground surface and the potential depth of mass graves. However, in the event that such burials are encountered, accommodations will be made to address them appropriately and with utmost sensitivity. If such burials are encountered and they are not associated with a violent event, excavations will be adjusted to leave them in place if possible. If removal is necessary to allow continued excavation, such exhumed burials will be re-interred following Oklahoma state laws, preferably within Oaklawn Cemetery according to their existing practices. If the remains appear to have been associated with another criminal event, they will be further investigated by law enforcement and Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (Ok SS 21-1168.4)
- It is expected that the mechanical excavation may be accomplished in 1-2 days. Hand excavations would likely require an additional 4-8 days, depending on the nature of any discovered remains.
- Excavations will be covered by tarp at the end of each day and security measures enacted.
- Detailed documentation will be compiled throughout the course of the excavations.
- Detailed total station mapping will be completed throughout and after excavation.
- Upon completion of the excavations, geotextile fabric and wood panels (or similar) will be emplaced in a manner to facilitate ease of later re-excavation. The removed overburden will be returned to the excavation block.
- Daily on-site meetings will be coordinated with interested members of the Public Oversight Committee to brief them on progress and findings.
- A summary briefing will be compiled and distributed to the Public Oversight Committee within two days of completion of the test excavations. A meeting will be arranged to further discuss the results with the Public Oversight Committee and a timeline for completion of a full report of this phase of the investigations.

#### *Additional Geophysical Survey in the Clyde Eddy Area*

The Physical Investigation Committee further proposes to conduct additional geophysical investigations in the Clyde Eddy area at Oaklawn Cemetery in an effort to relocate the anomaly detected by the previous investigations (Witten et al. 2001). This additional survey work is expected to take an additional 1-2 days to complete. The results will be compiled either as an addendum to the previous report (Hammerstedt and Regnier 2019) or as part of a new document and will be made available to the Public Oversight Committee.