



April, 2022

In July 2020, the OHS board of trustees set up a working group to study the history of the Slaves Burying Ground site and the history of slavery in Oysterponds. The group commissioned a Ground Penetrating Radar analysis of the Slaves Burying Ground site. After the GPR analysis was completed, OHS commissioned two other studies as outlined below.

Thanks largely to the work of Lyle Tuthill, we were able to obtain the services of Dr. John Rayburn, a geologist at SUNY/New Paltz, to do the Ground Penetrating Radar analysis. Dr. Rayburn and an assistant came to Orient on September 12, 2020, and spent several hours surveying the site. His report is highly technical, and the results are somewhat ambiguous, but he came to the following conclusions:

I think it's possible that the top 1-1.2 m of soil at this location is not natural and has been used to raise the site higher above the local groundwater table to provide a drier surface. If this is true, I can't speculate whether or not this was done specifically to provide a dry burial site or for some other origin like a building foundation or garden, however the 1904 map shows no structure directly associated with this property. I suspect the top layer is quite sandy and the lower layer below 1.2m is the glacial outwash that is mapped as covering most of the area of Orient south of the Harbor Hill moraine that runs along the north shore. It is possible that the upper unit is natural and if it is sandy with a lack of structure then I suspect a shallow water depositional environment like a lake formed here sometime after the glacier but before sea-level rose.

I do believe that the graves of Maria and Seth Tuthill contain remains although I am more certain of Maria's grave than I am about Seth's. I don't see any pattern in the shallow reflectors that might indicate shallowly buried grave markers (Figure 18), however I think it's possible that there are other unmarked burials in the western area of the grid and specifically in the northwestern corner (Figure 19). I don't believe

that there are any other potential burials at this site, but an investigation near the location of the metallic reflector might be worth doing even though I doubt that it marks a burial location (Figures 6 & 19). The unique soil stratigraphy makes it very difficult to spot soil disturbances, given the “massive” nature of the upper unit and the clusters of what I believe are stones in it.

I do not believe that the rocks currently used to signify unmarked graves across the property signify any known burials and were placed there as symbolic.

His full report is posted on the OHS website.

A few days after the GPR analysis was performed, OHS received a letter from Yan Rieger, a long-time Orient resident and OHS member, which explains the unexpected top layer of soil found by Dr. Rayburn. It also solved another mystery; on the deed for the Slaves Burying Ground site, which OHS purchased from James Douglass in 1951, there is a note that records that Mr. Douglass had settled all claims with Richard Nagy.

OHS was able to confirm the main details of Mr. Rieger’s story by contacting the Nagy’s surviving daughter, Carol, who now lives in California. The parcel that is today the Slaves Burying Ground was purchased in the mid-1940s by Richard and Eleanor Nagy from James Douglass; the Nagys intended to build a summer house there. They added fill to raise the site of the proposed house about four feet, but when they started digging for foundations, they discovered bones and artifacts. Not wanting to further disturb the site, the Nagys acquired from the Douglasses a lot across the street, 615 Narrow River Road, and built a house there. OHS founder and president George Latham arranged for OHS to purchase the cemetery site from the Douglass family in 1951 to preserve it and OHS recreated the burying ground that you see today.

Carol Nagy, now in her mid-60s, remembers the site as an overgrown field and a pile of rocks. Sometime in the 1960s someone (she thinks the Historical Society) cleaned it up and started to mow it. We know that John and Reggie Tuthill did a lot of work there in the early 1960s and think that they placed the stones, often assumed to be grave markers, in the grid pattern that you see today.

We are currently doing a title search to see if we can construct a full record of the ownership of the site going back to the Tuthill family, which reportedly sold their farm in 1917.

Dr. Rayburn recommended that OHS have his report reviewed by an archaeologist, so it retained Dr. Alison McGovern, an archaeologist who specializes in Indigenous and African-American sites on the East End of Long Island, to review the GPR analysis and to examine the surface of the site for any archaeological evidence. She made a site visit in January 2021 and evaluated Dr. Rayburn's report. She was not convinced that there was any evidence of graves in the Slaves Burying Ground site.

OHS then asked the Burying Ground Research Group, a local organization that surveys, records, and preserves historic cemeteries and burying grounds on the East End of Long Island, to examine the site. Principal Zach Studenroth made a site visit in April 2021. He found that the Slaves Burying Ground site is not oriented in the way a burying ground would have been in 19th-century Long Island, but the Tuthill gravestones appear to be authentic to the mid-19th-century and that they are intact, i.e. not broken below the ground. His complete report is on the OHS website. He and his associate carefully cleaned the Tuthill gravestones and reset them, so they are not in danger of falling over.

This research has helped OHS to understand the history of the site from the 1940s on, but more research is required to understand its complete history. One of the chief difficulties with the original sign is that the major source of information about slavery in that period is the U.S. Census, and although the census shows that other families in Oysterponds enslaved people, it does not list Seth and Maria Tuthill as being among them. OHS is currently trying to find more information about Seth and Maria Tuthill and any connections they had with slavery through archival research. OHS plans to install a new permanent sign for the site, but we need to know more about these Tuthills and the history of the site, especially from the 1840s to the 1940s, before an appropriate sign can be written.

OHS has the original sign from 1951 safe in its permanent collection. It has no plans to make any changes to the site other than providing a new permanent sign with a broader interpretation that includes its fascinating history.