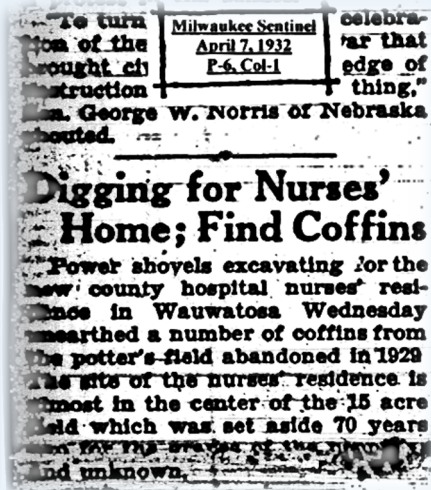


DESCENDANT COMMUNITY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY GROUNDS CEMETERIES, INC.

by Judy Klimt Houston, President

<https://descendantcommunity.org>

PART 6: 1925-1991 CONCEALING THE DEAD: A HISTORY OF DELIBERATE ERASURE

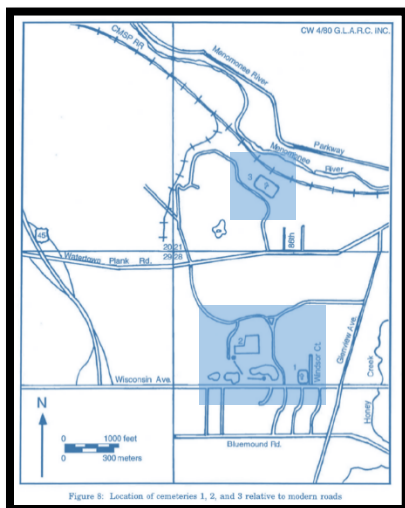
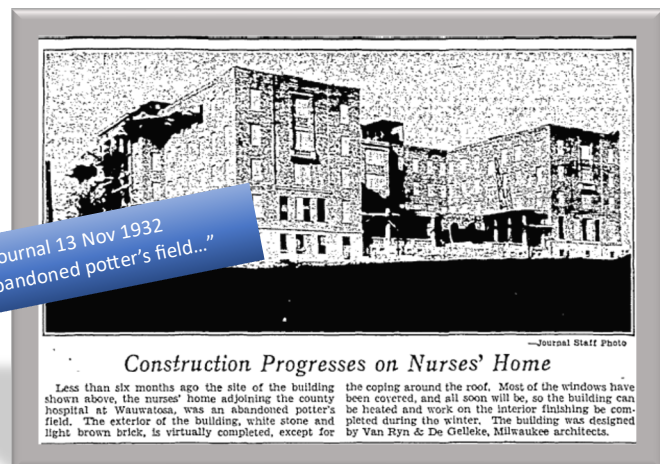


In 1928, Milwaukee County removed the wooden markers and fencing from Cemetery 2—just three years after the final burial—to construct the Nurses' Residence, obscuring more than 7,000 graves. By 1932, construction work unearthed many remains, disturbing over half the cemetery. While a small number of graves—likely those with visiting relatives—were moved to Cemetery 3, most were left in place.^{1 2 3}

Labeled as paupers and treated as burdens, many graves were displaced and reburied as landfill, with no priority given to respectful reinterment.⁴ (See: Part 3)

In the early 1980s, the Great Lakes Archaeological Research Center (GLARC), led by Mark E. Bruhy and David F. Overstreet, confirmed widespread burials across the County Grounds during a sewage planning survey—though Cemetery 4 remained unmapped.⁵

Milwaukee Journal 13 Nov 1932
“...was an abandoned potter's field...”



INTRODUCTION:

A literature and archive review, as well as a field check of project locations, of five proposed diversion structures planned by the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage Commission, Inc. and completed in March, 1980. As noted in the report detailing the finding of this preliminary investigation, a diversion structure is planned for Wisconsin Avenue at a point west of 84th Street leading to a County Institution parking lot just east of Elmspring Avenue. Directly west of this locus a late 19th century pauper's cemetery was indicated by the disturbance of several burials. These burials were encountered during the 1971 pipeline excavation at a point adjacent to the north side of Wisconsin Avenue at approximately the west 8500 block. Subsequent to the completion of the above mentioned report, additional information relating to the nature and size of the pauper cemetery was discovered. This additional information warrants presentation at this time.

3

In an April 7th, 1932 newspaper article the following item appeared:

A number of coffins were unearthed from the potter's field abandoned in 1929 by power shovels excavating for the new County Hospital nurse's home in Wauwatosa. The nurses' residence is on the site almost in the center of the 15 acre field which was set aside 70 years ago for the graves of the penniless and unknown (Milwaukee Leader, April 7, 1932).

In viewing Figure 2, the nurses' residence is indicated by the black circle directly north of the center pond adjacent to Wisconsin Avenue. The black circle south of the easternmost pond presents the location of the burials disturbed during the 1971 pipeline excavations. These data foster the conclusion that the area between the marked cemetery and the nurses residence probably includes additional burials that were interred during the years 1862-1929 when the first potter's field was abandoned. The linear distance between these two points is approximately 1,700 feet. If we assume the cemetery had either rectangular or circular dimensions (although this cannot be documented), the size of the cemetery would certainly exceed the 15 acres noted in the 1932 Milwaukee Leader article.

It is difficult to believe that a cemetery of this size could go unremembered or unmarked, however, the "Register of Burials at Milwaukee County Poor Farm" lends credence to this possibility. This record which is housed at the business office of the Milwaukee County Nursing Home lists all burials on the grounds between February 14, 1882 and June 14, 1974. Again, keeping in mind that the more recent potter's field had been established in the 1920's, we tabulated the burials between the years 1882 and 1923. This total is approximately 5,000 individual burials which must have been placed in the original pauper burial ground. Occasional notations in this record indicate that there were instances of disinterment for reburial in private cemeteries. However, this appears to be a rather infrequent occurrence. Moreover, there appears to be no record as to how many individuals were buried here between 1862 and 1882. For this reason, it appears the original cemetery could have contained well over the 5,000 total.

5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:

The foregoing discussion leaves little doubt that construction activities for the 84th Street and Wisconsin Avenue diversion structure could impact a middle to late 19th century pauper cemetery. While disinterment has, to some degree, reduced the number of individual burials placed here between the 1862 and 1929 there is convincing evidence that many additional burials remain at the early pauper cemetery. Unfortunately, the archival documents consisting of old newspaper articles and the "Register of Burials" at Milwaukee County Poor Farm as well as the map from which Figure 1 was taken, give us little information about these 19th century burial practices. As a result, prior to construction further investigations, e.g., test excavations, should be conducted to determine the presence or absence of burials in the construction impact zone.

REFERENCES CITED

H. BELDEN & COMPANY
1876 Illustrated Historical Atlas of Milwaukee County.

MILWAUKEE LEADER
1932 Coffin unearthed on nurse site. April 7.

MILWAUKEE SENTINEL
1909 140,000 Sleep in Eleven City Graveyards. March 9.

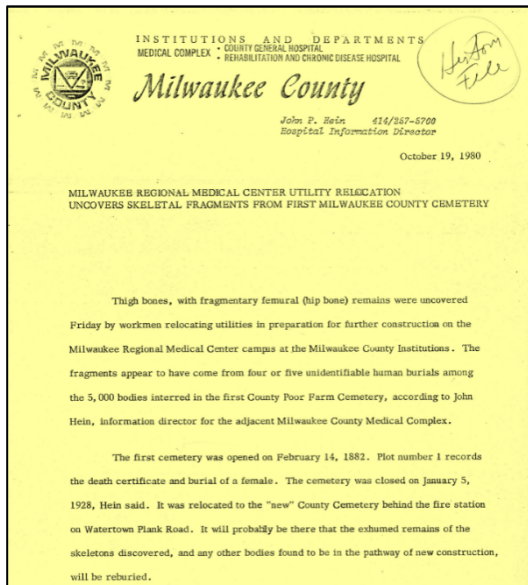
1974 County Acts to close potter's field. September 18.

1974 Resting place of nameless, potter's field, will close. December 30.

REGISTER OF BURIALS AT MILWAUKEE COUNTY POOR FARM.
1882-1974 On file at the business office, Milwaukee County Nursing Home.

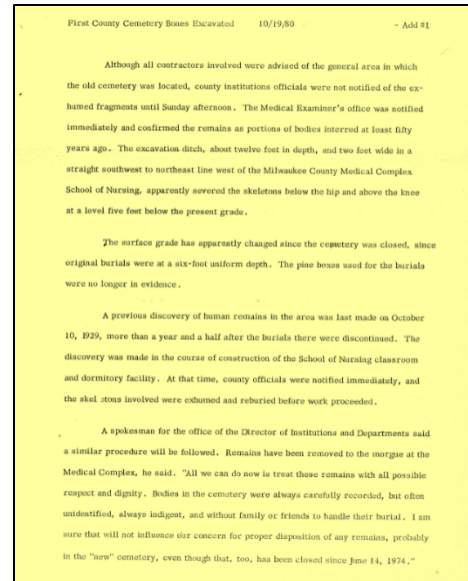
Although the March 1980 survey mapped the cemeteries and recommended monitoring during future construction, the "forgotten" cemetery was "accidentally" disturbed that October when Milwaukee Regional Medical Center (MRMC) trenched for electrical cables.^{6 7} (See: Part 4 and Fig. 1)





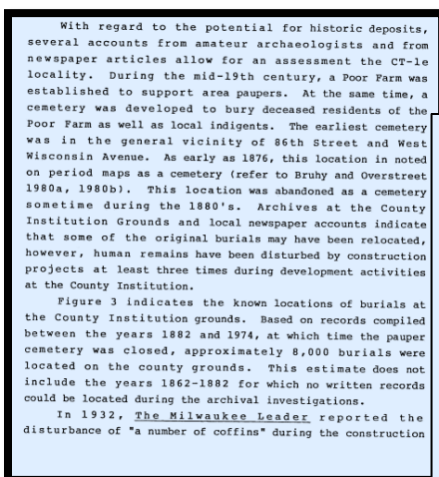
A County memo indicated probable reburial in Cemetery 3, though that site had been closed since 1974.⁸

In 2024, the County could not confirm where those remains were actually reburied.⁹



A 1983 GLARC survey¹⁰, conducted for a proposed drop shaft north of Watertown Plank Road, documented all four burial sites, noted earlier site 1 accidental disturbances, and warned:

"Because of the potentially sensitive nature of human remains, on-site monitoring should be conducted during site preparation."



of County Hospital nurse's residence. Again, in 1971, at least 4 burials were disturbed by construction along West Wisconsin Avenue. Archaeologists from the Milwaukee Public Museum and The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee conducted preliminary work at the site. Subsequent laboratory analyses conducted by Dr. Ralph Alexander at the University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee demonstrated that the burials were Euro-American, not Native American as originally presumed by the Milwaukee Public Museum Staff. There is little doubt that these were the remains of paupers from the Potter's Field established during the mid-late 19th century. *The Milwaukee Journal* provides a brief summary of the site location, burials, and interpretations in their edition of May 19, 1971.

Most recently, in October of 1980, burials were again accidentally disturbed by construction work on the County Institution grounds. During the course of excavations between County General Hospital and Froedert Memorial Lutheran Hospital, 4 or 5 graves were discovered. *The Milwaukee Journal* October 20th, 1980 edition provides a complete report of the incident. Appendix A contains a transcription of newspaper accounts related to the Pauper Cemetery at the County Institution grounds between the years 1909 and 1980.

In addition to these locations of burials derived from newspaper accounts, at least one other burial locality exists outside the boundaries of the marked cemetery which was closed in 1974. This location, northwest of the present marked and fenced location is indicated by the number 2 on Figure 3, and is marked on the ground with a cast-iron headstone bearing the inscription "No. 89."

Archival research provides substantial evidence that pauper burials occur at several locations on the current county institution grounds. At least three different reported episodes of accidental disturbance of human remains have occurred during the 20th century, the most recent event taking place in October of 1980. Thus, our intensive survey investigations at the proposed site of CT-1e were designed to meet two primary objectives. The first of these



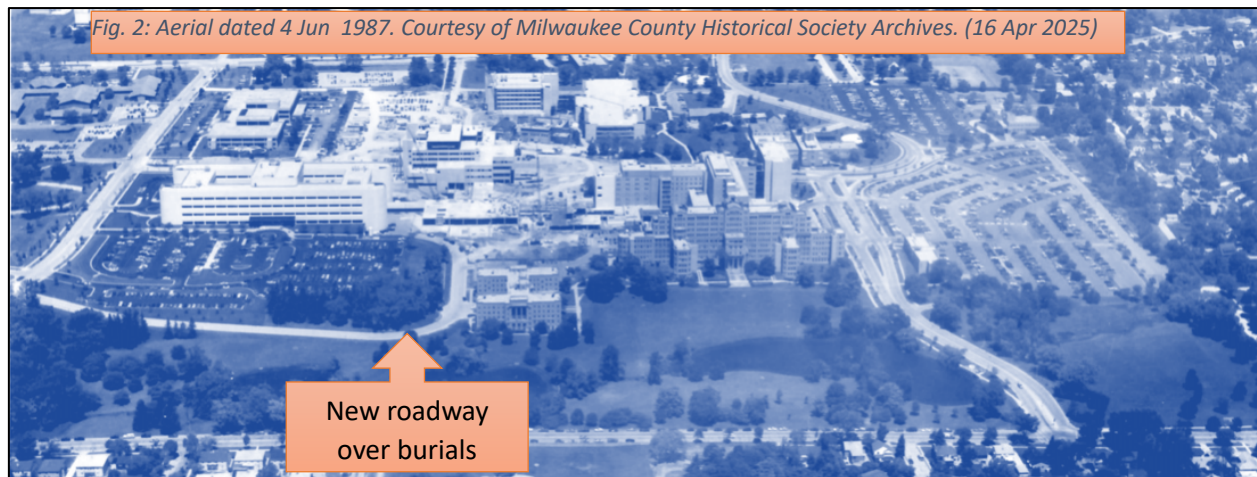
1983 survey notations:

1. Cemeteries 1 & 2 - County Grounds.
2. Cemetery 4 - Asylum burial site.
3. Cemetery 3.

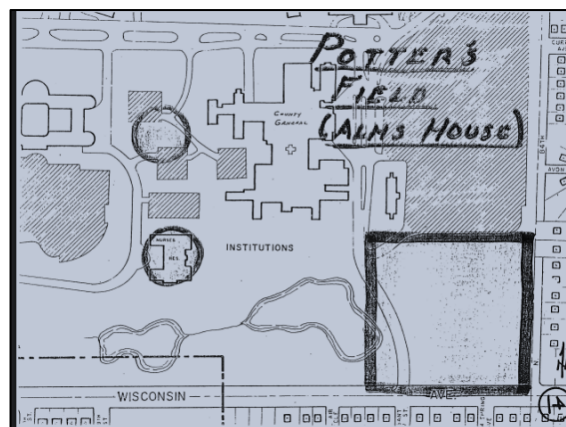
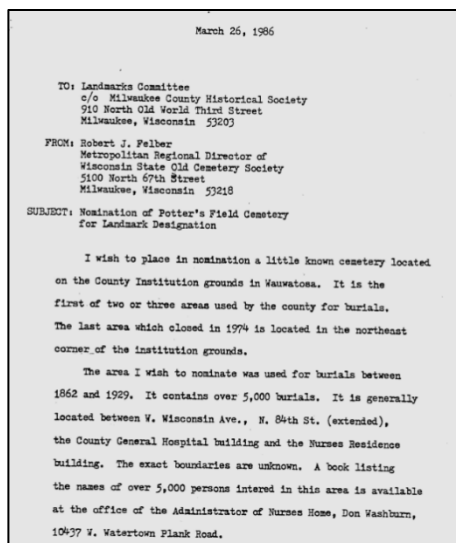
Paving Over the Dead

In full knowledge of the documented cemetery—confirmed by the 1980 and 1983 surveys, prior disturbances, and its own written admissions—Milwaukee County proceeded in 1985-1986 with construction of the first stage of Doyme Avenue at MRMC (See: Part 5). According to 2013 excavation findings, this paved over 880 intact graves, including 209 adult-sized and 671 juvenile/infant burials beneath and along the road's southern edge.¹¹

The contrast with the 1962 I-94 relocation of veterans from Wood National Cemetery is stark.¹² Then, graves were respectfully moved with ceremony; while 25 years later, the County entombed the paupers' cemetery in asphalt—an act of deliberate erasure and permanent desecration of a burial site it was legally and morally bound to protect.

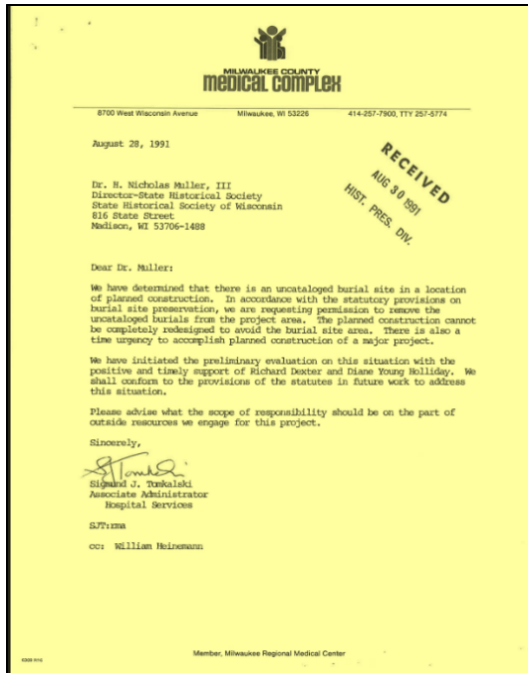


March 1986: Robert J. Felber, Metropolitan Regional Director of the Wisconsin State Old Cemetery Society, submitted maps and newspaper articles to support his request of Milwaukee County Historical Society for landmark recognition of the County Grounds Cemeteries.¹³



The original potter's field of Milwaukee County was located on the county grounds, approximately where the School of Nursing now stands (8700 W. Wisconsin Ave.) The first burial there took place on February 14, 1882.

April 1988: Author Sharon Selz indicated inherent knowledge of the cemetery's existence at the Nurses' Residence in her news article published in Milwaukee's South Side Spirit paper.¹⁴ (See: Part 4)



From Law to Destruction

Wisconsin's burial law, Wis. Stat. § 157.70, was enacted in 1987 to prohibit disturbing human burials without prior approval from the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) Director.¹⁵

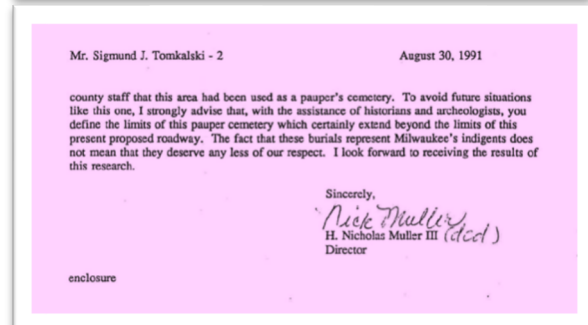
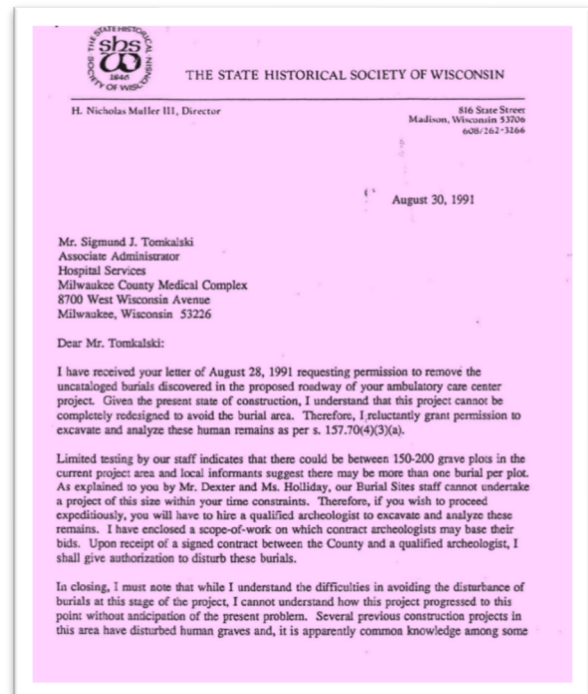
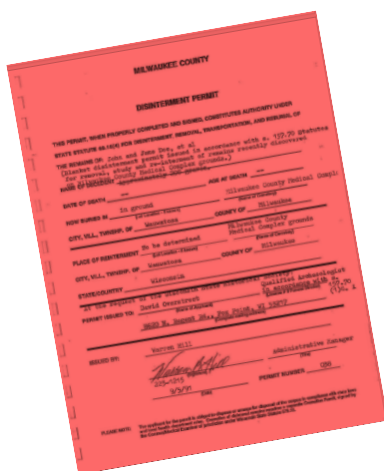
This law should have prevented any further harm to Cemetery 2, yet in August 1991, Milwaukee County allowed MRMC to proceed with construction of a roadway and medical facility on the County's land housing the burial site without WHS authorization.

Human remains were unearthed, halting work only briefly while MRMC applied for a permit-claiming "time urgency" to complete the project.¹⁶

Two days later, the WHS Director granted the permit but condemned the situation, stating it was "common knowledge among some county staff that this area had been used as a pauper's cemetery" and questioning how the project advanced "without anticipation of the present problem." He reminded MRMC that "the fact that these burials represent Milwaukee's indigents does not mean that they deserve any less of our respect."¹⁷

By November 1992, all but 1.6 acres of the original 3.48-acre cemetery had been destroyed for Froedter's trauma center and parking, while 1,649

ancestors were exhumed from their resting place and moved into shelved boxes.¹⁸

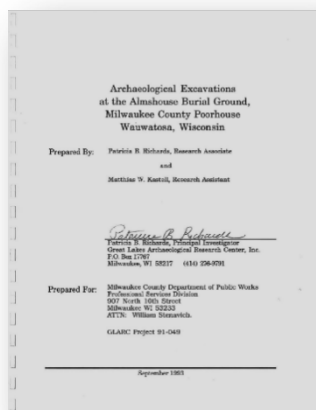
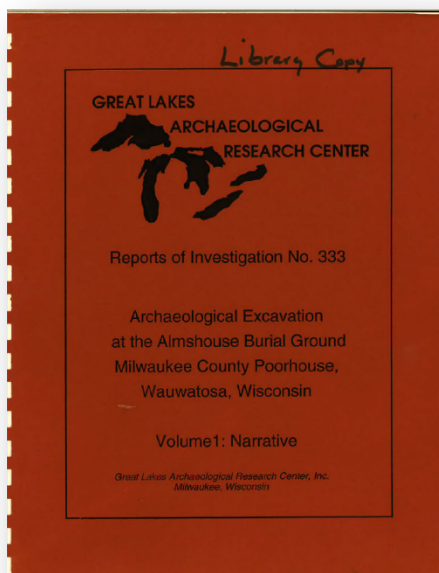


From Recovery to Delayed Reporting

Under the statute¹⁹, archaeologically exhumed remains require an interim disposition process:

- A qualified archaeologist recovers the remains and submits a Report of Investigation (ROI) to WHS.
- A qualified skeletal analyst conducts osteological analysis and submits a separate ROI.

The WHS Director then determines final disposition-burial, cremation, or curation-based on the ROIs, submitted proposals, and Registrant priority.



The Great Lakes Archaeological Research Center conducted the recovery in 1991-92 and submitted its 541-page ROI in 1993; authored by Patricia B. Richards, Principal Investigator with Matthias W. Kastell, Research Assistant.²⁰

Dr. Norman Sullivan of Marquette University performed the osteological analysis, but his ROI with image files was not submitted until 2007-08 - over 15 years after the remains were removed from the ground. (See: Figs. 4²¹ and 5²²)

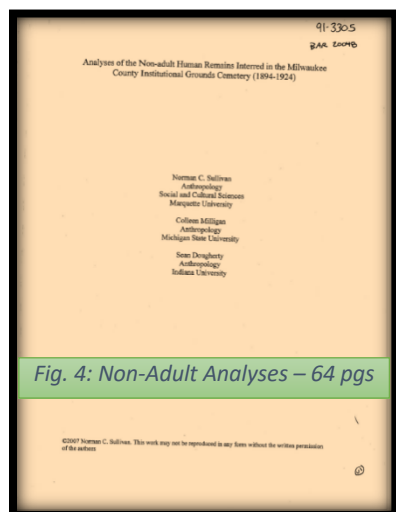


Fig. 4: Non-Adult Analyses – 64 pgs

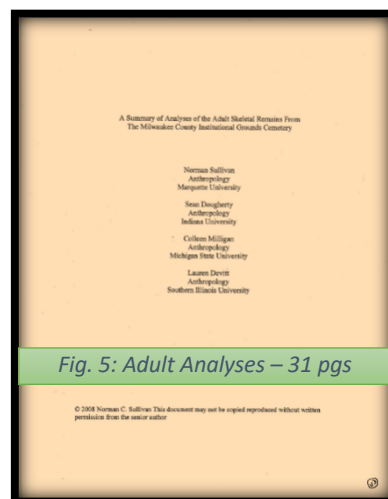
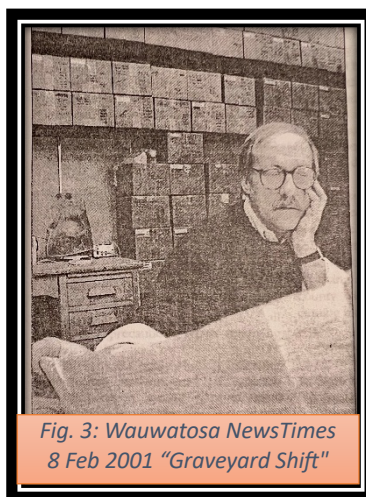
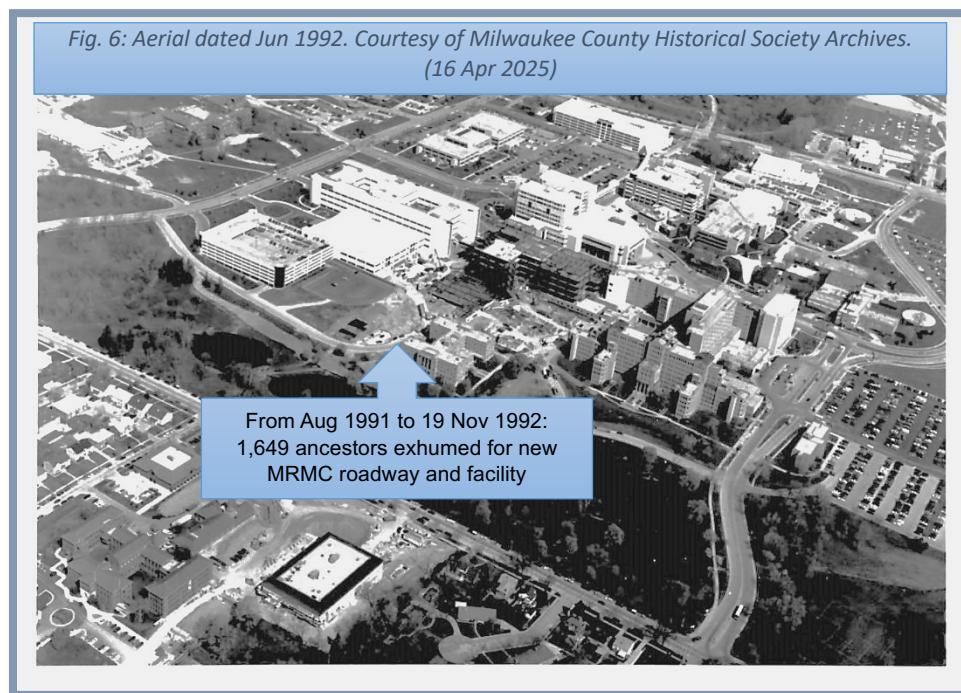


Fig. 5: Adult Analyses – 31 pgs

Ethical and Legal Implications

The 1991-92 destruction of Cemetery 2, despite clear evidence of its existence, raises serious concerns about compliance with both the letter and the spirit of Wisconsin's burial law. The following points summarize the key ethical and legal issues:

- **Violation of Statutory Intent** – Wis. Stat. § 157.70 was enacted to prevent disturbance of human burials without prior approval from the WHS Director. The decision to proceed with construction without authorization undermined the very purpose of the law.
- **Prior Knowledge Ignored** – The County had long-standing documentation of the cemetery's location, including 1980 and 1983 surveys, newspaper accounts, accidental disturbance records, and its own internal memo acknowledging the site. Proceeding with construction in spite of this knowledge suggests willful neglect.
- **Ethical Disparity in Treatment** – The WHS Director's reminder that "the fact that these burials represent Milwaukee's indigents does not mean that they deserve any less of our respect" underscores the inequitable treatment of the poor compared to veterans and others whose graves received relocation and ceremony.
- **Permit Approval Under Time Pressure** – WHS approval was granted only days after MRMC's application, following the claim of "time urgency" to complete the project. This expedited decision-making may have compromised thorough review and public accountability.
- **Prolonged Delay in Final Analysis** – Although the archaeological recovery was completed in 1992, the skeletal analysis ROI was not submitted until 2007-08. This 15-year delay prolonged the interim disposition, preventing timely reburial and closure.
- **Pattern of Erasure** – The erasure and destruction of County Grounds Cemetery 2 reflects a century-long pattern in Milwaukee County of permitting infrastructure projects to obliterate the known burial site, disregarding the graves and dignity of Milwaukee's marginalized populations.



Timeline of Cemetery 2 Erasure and Related Events (1928–2008)

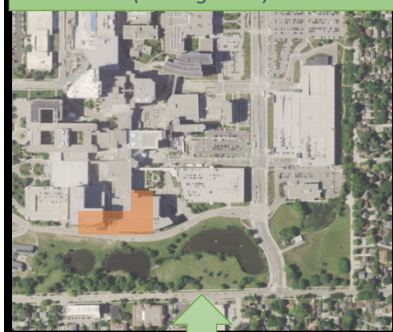
- 1928: Milwaukee County removes wooden markers and fencing from Cemetery 2, three years after the last burial, to build the Nurses' Residence, concealing over 7,000 graves.
- 1932: Construction unearths many remains, disturbing more than half the cemetery. While some graves remain in place; others are displaced and reburied as landfill.
- 1962: Veterans from Wood National Cemetery are respectfully relocated for I-94 construction.
- Mar 1980: GLARC survey maps cemeteries, recommends monitoring during construction.
- Oct 1980: "Accidental" disturbance occurs during MRMC trenching for electrical cables. County staff indicate awareness of burial site and plan to rebury the disturbed remains.
- 1983: GLARC survey for proposed drop shaft in NE corner of County Grounds documents all four cemeteries, warns of burials and advises on-site monitoring.
- 1985-86: Milwaukee County constructs first stage of Doyne Avenue at MRMC, paving over 880 intact graves (209 adult, 671 juvenile/infant).
- Mar 1986: Robert J. Felber requests landmark status for County Grounds Cemeteries as detailed on maps.
- Apr 1988: Sharon Selz's South Side Spirit article notes cemetery's existence, indicating the community's knowledge of burial site.
- 1987: Wisconsin enacts Wis. Stat. § 157.70, requiring WHS Director approval before disturbing burials.
- Aug 1991: MRMC begins construction on known burial site without WHS approval; human remains are unearthed.
- 28 Aug 1991: MRMC request to disturb burial site.
- 30 Aug 1991: WHS Director grants disturbance permit, condemns circumstances, reminds MRMC indigent burials deserve equal respect.
- Aug 1991 to 19 Nov 1992: All but 1.6 acres of the original 3.48-acre Cemetery 2 destroyed for Froedtert's trauma center and parking; GLARC exhumes 1,649 remains.
- 1993: GLARC submits ROI to WHS.
- 1992-08: Dr. Norman Sullivan of Marquette University receives exhumed remains and performs osteological analysis.
- 2007-08: Dr. Norman Sullivan submits osteological analysis ROI-over 15 years after recovery.

Fig. 7: Aerial dated Apr 1929. Courtesy of Milwaukee County Historical Society Archives. (16 Apr 2025)



West Wisconsin Avenue
Cemetery markers and fencing are removed
"L" shape = Approx. Cemetery 2

Fig. 8: Aerial dated 23 Jun 2022. <https://maps.sco.wisc.edu/whaifinder/> (10 Aug 2025)



West Wisconsin Avenue
"L" shape = Approx. Cemetery 2

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- ⁵ Bruhy, Mark E. and David F. Overstreet, “*Phase I Investigation of Five Proposed Diversion Structures, April 1980 Addendum.*” Report submitted to Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. (1980)
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Note:

Citations are presented as originally published or received, to preserve the integrity of referenced materials. Variations in name formatting, date precision, and structure reflect the source documents and are retained intentionally.