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REPORT ON
ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING
DURING FENCE POST EXCAVATIONS
ON THE EAST SIDE OF PROSPECT CEMETERY
ALONG 159TH STREET
IN JAMAICA, QUEENS, NEW YORK



Contractor excavations of Post Holes 13 and 16 at Prospect Cemetery along 159th Street facing west.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a report on archaeological monitoring during excavations for a new fence, curb and bluestone paving along 159th Street at Prospect Cemetery, a New York City Landmark. The cemetery was established by 1668 and the chapel on 159th Street built in 1857.

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) had previously determined monitoring would be appropriate for this project since the fence work planned along 159th Street had a low potential for encountering unmarked graves.

The contractor hand excavated postholes along 159th Street and mechanically excavated for bluestone paving and curb near the chapel. No unmarked graves or displace human remains were identified. It was recommended that planning for excavations for the remaining sections of the fence consider the potential for encountering unmarked graves.

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INTRODUCTION

Several improvements are underway in the vicinity of Prospect Cemetery in Jamaica, Queens, including replacing the perimeter fence. The cemetery, New York City landmark, was established before 1668 and is the oldest cemetery in Queens. The chapel on 159th Street was built in 1857 (NYCLPC 1992: 197).

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has issued a permit for replacement of the section of the fence along 159th Street, the east side of the cemetery (see Figure 1). The fence replacement project involves the contractor hand excavating individual postholes for the new fence. The new fence is to be six inches east of the old fence and each fence post about five and a half to six feet apart. In addition to the fence posts, the contractor is also placing *bluestone pavement* and curbing in front of the chapel. The bluestone work called for excavation of the area in front of the chapel to about six inches to one foot below ground surface. Excavations for the new curb around the bluestone on either side of the chapel involved machine trenching about four feet wide and fifteen feet long to a depth of two feet below ground surface.

In conjunction with the fence replacement, and because of the concern for inadvertently disturbing unmarked graves, a plan for archaeological monitoring was prepared and included in the contractor's work specification. This plan was approved by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and was discussed with the New York City Parks Department, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, the landscape architects Donna Walcavage Landscape Architecture and Urban Design and the contractor Padilla Construction Services, Inc.. The monitoring plan called for the contractor to hand excavate each post hole and gave the archaeologist authority to halt excavations should human remains be encountered.

This report will present the findings of archaeological monitoring conducted for the fence post, bluestone and curb excavations at Prospect Cemetery along 159th Street. The work has been done in accordance with the guidelines of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. This report was prepared by Linda Stone, RPA for Padilla Construction Services, Inc. The archaeological fieldwork described in this report was conducted by Ms. Stone on May 26 and June 14, 2005.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The scope of work for archaeological monitoring included the ability of the archaeologist to temporarily halt excavations should any human remains be encountered during contractor excavations.

Curb and Bluestone Excavation

Upon arrival to commence monitoring, a walkover immediately revealed that excavations for the curb to the south of the chapel had been completed prior. Photo 1 shows the conditions at that time. The rain washed edges of the trench can be seen through the plastic mesh safety fence in the photo. The trench base and profiles were examined to determine if any bones were visible, indicating disturbed burials. None were seen.

Several PVC pipes are seen in the foreground of Photo 1. A wider view of the excavations for these pipes is seen in Photo 2. The pipe trench is relatively shallow, less than one foot below ground surface, and to the east of the line of the new fence, partially within the area of bluestone excavations. The pipes were installed as part of the wider road improvements for 159th Street and were not part of the fence project. However, the areas disturbed by the pipe trench were also examined for evidence of human remains and none were found.

Figure 2 is a section of the demolition plan for Prospect Cemetery. It shows the areas of the bluestone and curb in front of the chapel. The excavations for the curb on the north of the chapel and the bluestone work involved mechanical excavation with a backhoe whose bucket was two feet wide. The curb excavation headed west from the pipes for a distance of 16.5 feet and was about four feet wide and two feet deep. The length of the bluestone excavations was about 51.5 feet north to south and about 16.5 feet east to west and was about six inches to a foot deep. The excavations were monitored to identify any possible human remains and none were found. After contractor excavations were completed, the excavated areas were walked and more closely inspected to ensure no remains were identified. None were.

Soils were compared to the Munsell Soil Color Charts. The topsoil was 10YR3/2 very dark grayish brown loam. This was underlain with 10YR4/6 dark yellowish brown sandy silt to the base of the excavation.

Postholes

A total of 46 postholes were hand excavated over a two-day period. Figure 3 shows the location of each posthole. In general, the postholes were along a line about six inches east of the existing fence posts. However there were deviations in three places for trees; PH 13 – 16, 31 – 34 and 38 – 41. Each posthole was between 3.5 and four feet deep. In general, the first foot was mottled 10YR3/4 dark yellowish brown to 10YR3/2 very dark grayish brown sandy loam and that was underlain by 10YR4/6 dark yellowish brown sand.

No human remains were identified during posthole excavations.

Artifacts

No artifacts were recovered during the Prospect Cemetery fence monitoring. However a number of them were documented. PH 37 contained an amber colored glass flask bottom at about 1 foot below ground surface (bgs). PH 38 had a corroded pipe wrench at about 2.3 feet bgs and PH 39 contained a leather and cloth work glove at about 1.7 feet bgs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

No human remains were encountered during monitoring of the Prospect Cemetery fence project. Very few artifacts were observed and they all date from more recent times than the cemetery and are most likely related to repair work done on utilities along 159th Street than to do with the cemetery itself. Since the work described in this report was done during the construction excavations, no further archaeological work is recommended for this part of the fence project. However, additional fence work is planned along the north and west sides and part of the southeast side of the cemetery (see Figure 1). When decisions are made regarding locations of excavations, they should be compared to areas of concern for encountering unmarked graves. For example, the section of the fence along Beaver Road may be moved a certain distance to the north of the existing fence. It is possible the fence will be relocated far enough to the north that encountering burials in the excavations may be less likely. However, should the new fence be planned closer to the existing fence, there may be a greater concern and either archaeological excavation of the postholes or monitoring of the contractor postholes could be an appropriate action.

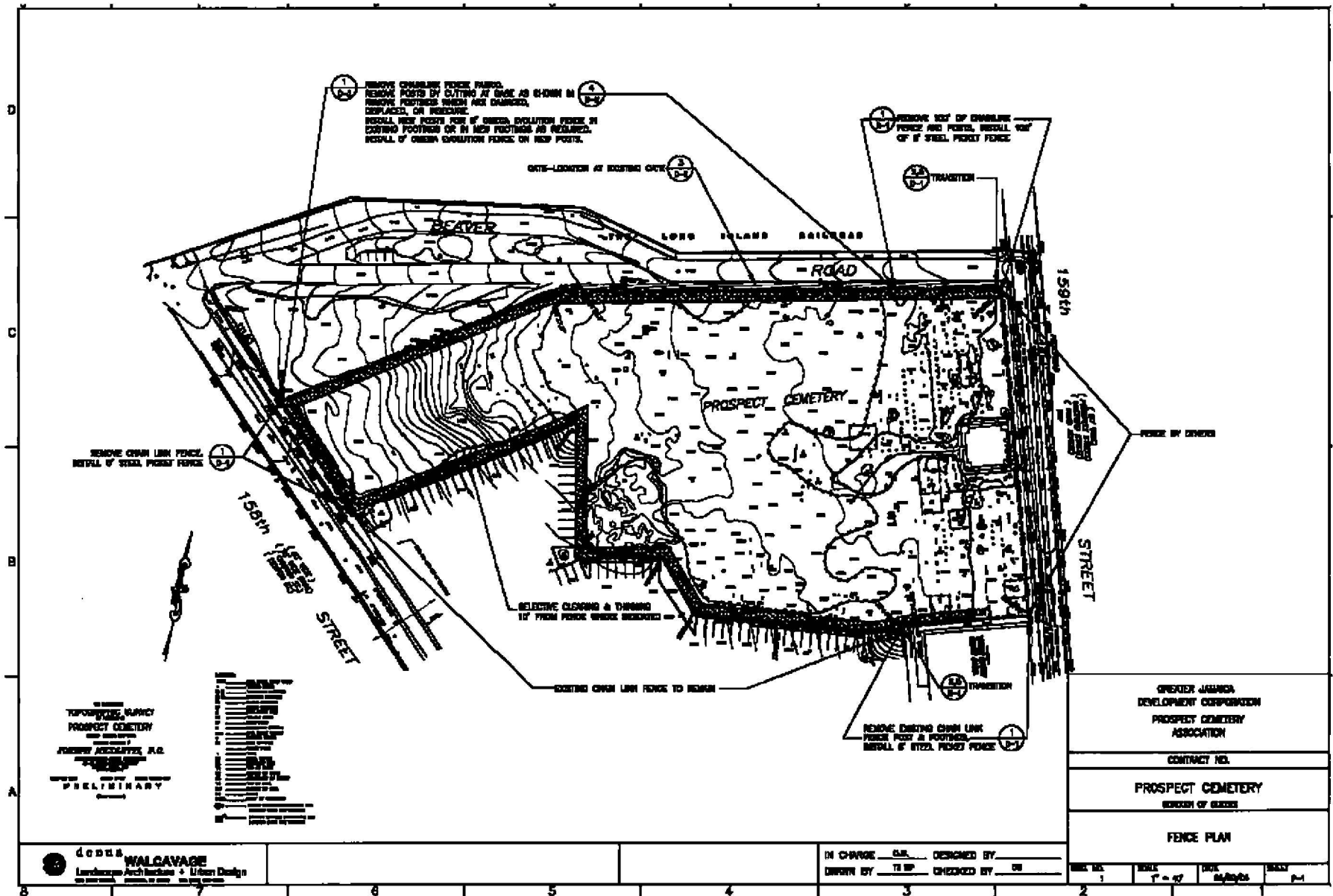


Figure 1 Topographic Map of Prospect Cemetery.

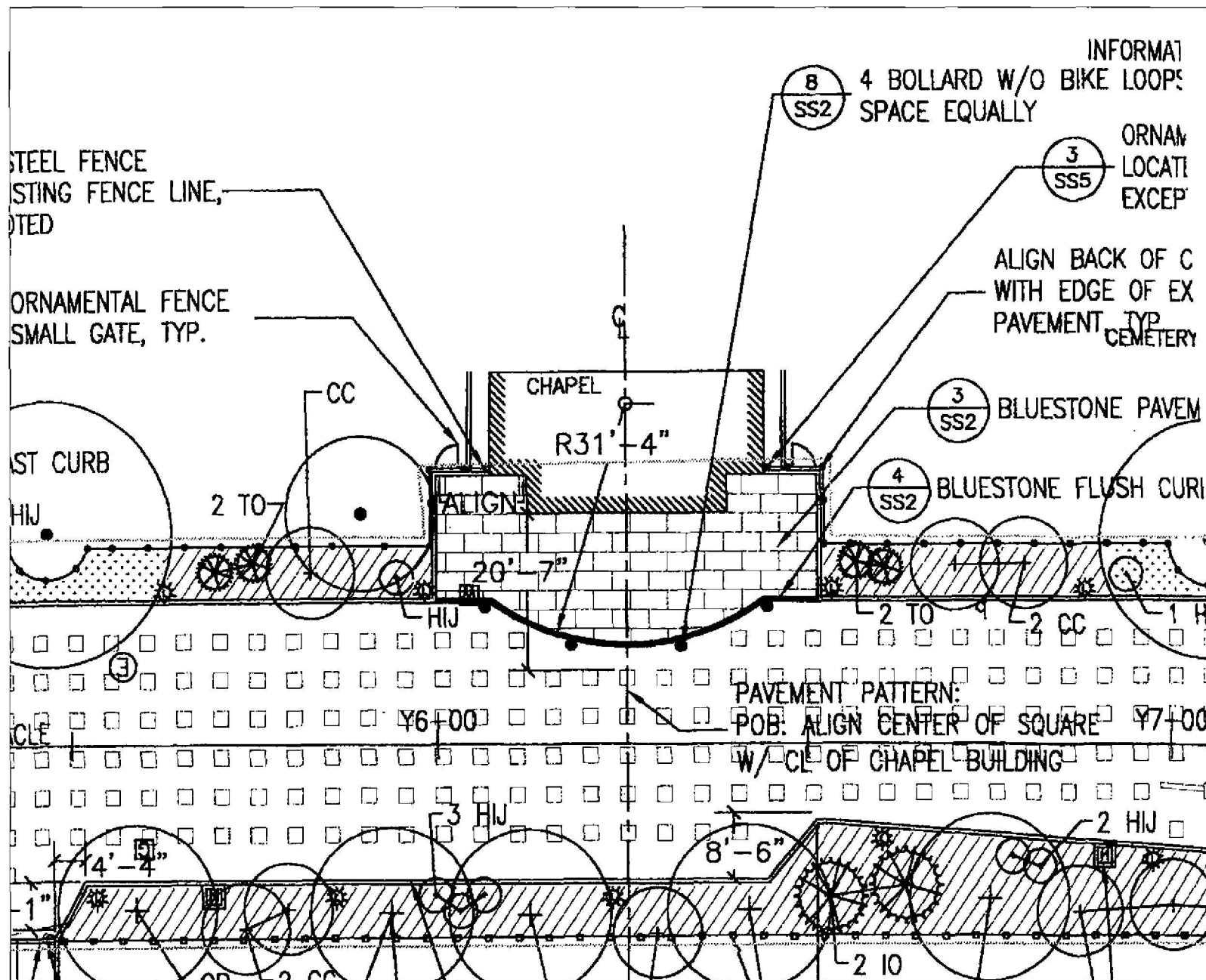


Figure 2 Section of the Prospect Cemetery demolition plan showing the area of the chapel with bluestone paving and curb.

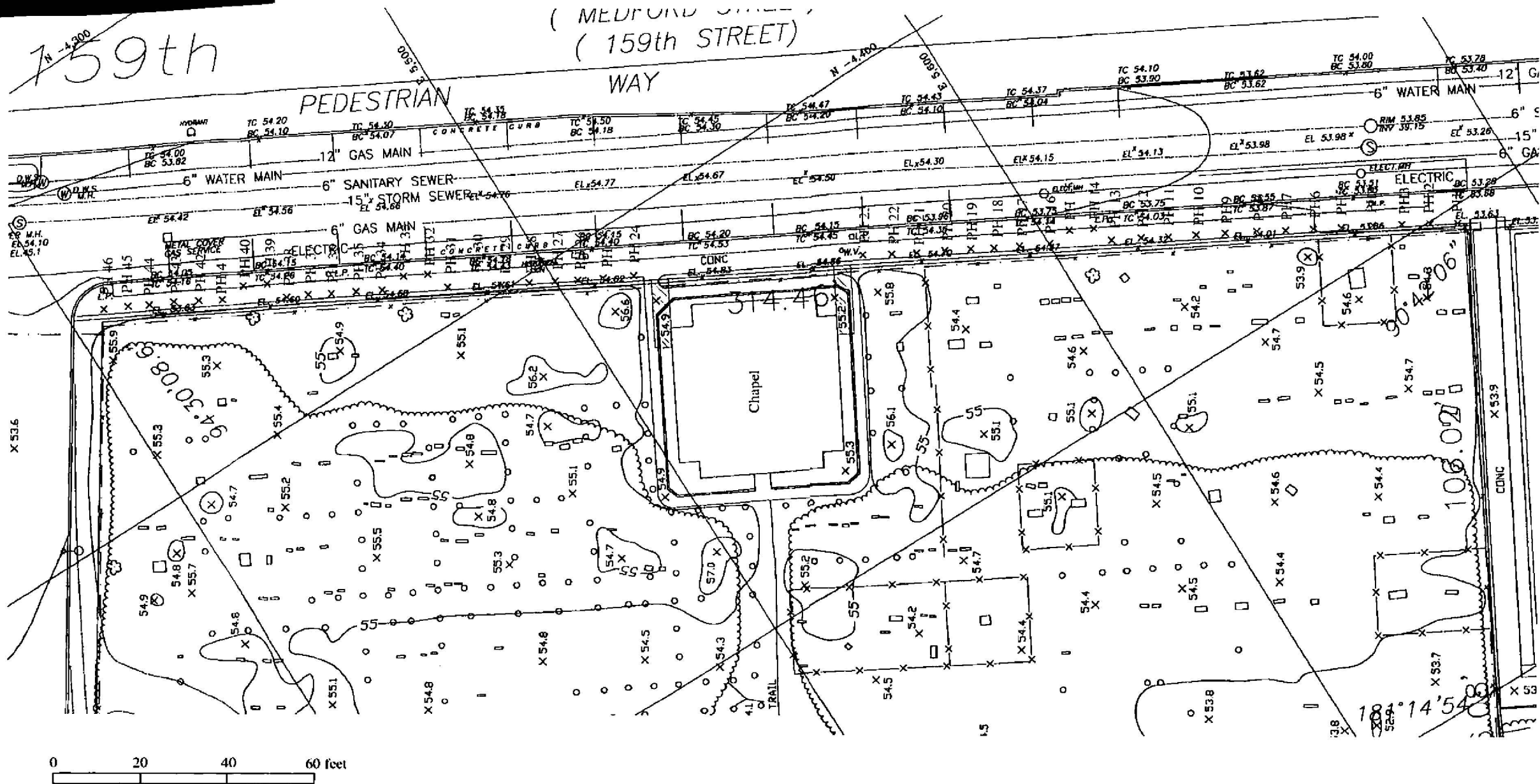


Figure 3 Topographic survey along 159 Street showing post hole and trench excavation locations.



Photo 1 View of site conditions at start of monitoring on the south side of the chapel.



Photo 2 View of site conditions at the start of monitoring on the east side of the chapel.

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