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**MEMORANDUM SUMMARIZING PRELIMINARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION
EFFORTS**

SILVER LAKE CEMETERY RESTORATION

STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK

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Prepared for:

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A. INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew Free Burial Association (HFBA) has proposed the restoration of the Silver Lake Cemetery in Staten Island, New York. Elizabeth Kennedy Landscape Architect, PLLC, (EKLA) was retained by the HFBA to assist with the restoration of the cemetery. EKLA retained AKRF to provide cultural resources consulting services during the completion of the project.

Silver Lake Cemetery is one of two Staten Island cemeteries owned by the HFBA, an organization dedicated to providing free burials to members of the Jewish community who could not otherwise afford interment. Silver Lake Cemetery was founded in 1892 and was active until the early 20th century, when the majority of its plots were filled, many of which were unmarked. Over the last century, the cemetery has experienced flooding, resulting in some erosion. In addition, headstones throughout the cemetery have been lost or damaged, and trees and other vegetation have affected or disturbed some burials.

The proposed restoration of the cemetery would involve the completion of a non-invasive geophysical survey to identify the locations of unmarked graves and the installation of new drainage infrastructure to alleviate flooding in the cemetery. The restoration could also include the righting and mending fallen or broken gravestones, the placement of stones at the ends of unmarked burial rows, and other actions to ensure that the burials within the cemetery are restored in a dignified manner and preserved for many years to come. The restoration would be completed in three phases: (1) project design associated with the immediate efforts to improve flooding conditions within the cemetery and preliminary restoration (i.e. headstone retrieval and vegetation management); (2) creation of a Master Plan to interpret and restore the cemetery; and (3) construction. This memorandum has been prepared to summarize archaeological consultation services completed as part of the first phase of the cemetery's restoration.

For the purposes of this preliminary analysis, a digital database of the cemetery's records was provided by HFBA. The database includes more than 13,600 entries, nearly all of which have been assigned numbers

to designation the location of each interment. In addition to the digital database provided by HFBA, original burial registers for Silver Lake Cemetery are available on Ancestry.com. The majority of the information from these digital documents is included within the materials provided by HFBA. However, some additional information is included regarding the individuals interred at the cemetery, such as address, profession, and occasionally the cause or manner of death.

B. BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SILVER LAKE CEMETERY

The HFBA was founded in 1888 as the *Chebra Agudas Achim Chesed Shel Emeth* (The Society of the Brotherhood of True Charity) to provide free burials to indigent or impoverished members of the Jewish Community on Manhattan's Lower East Side (HFBA n.d.). Four years after its founding, the HFBA established the Silver Lake Cemetery in Staten Island, making it the oldest Jewish Cemetery in the county (Tango 2004). A survey map of the cemetery was prepared by W.H. Bostwick in 1892. This map depicts the original plan for the cemetery, with 15 separate sections separated by narrow pathways, all marked with survey monuments. The original section divisions do not appear to have been maintained during the cemetery's period of active use, however, and subsequent maps of the cemetery depict the section boundaries differently. While most sections of the cemetery were used by the HFBA, some were used by private burial societies and others were family plots. These sections were not necessarily used for the burial of the indigent. While occasional burials continue at Silver Lake Cemetery to this day, the cemetery's main period of use lasted less than 20 years. By 1909, most of the cemetery's plots were filled and the HFBA established a second, larger burial ground, Mount Richmond Cemetery on Staten Island (Salmon 2006). During this period, thousands of individuals were interred at the cemetery, many in unmarked graves.

Silver Lake Cemetery was opened between two existing cemeteries, Silver Mount to the northeast (opened 1866) and Woodland Cemetery to the southwest (opened 1856). The former Marine Cemetery, opened in the mid-19th century, was formerly across the street from the Silver Lake Cemetery, on ground now included within the Silver Lake Golf Course. The 1874 and 1887 Beers atlases of Staten Island depict the land that would later become the Silver Lake Cemetery as the 4.5-acre Estate of J.G. Thanner, from which the HFBA purchased the land (ibid). What is likely the original Thanner home and an outbuilding are depicted on the 1892 Bostwick survey of the cemetery.¹ While the adjacent cemeteries are depicted as being developed with small ponds, none are shown on the maps within the Thanner estate. The 1891 Bien and Vermule map of Staten Island appears to depict the two ponds on the Silver Mount and Woodland Cemeteries as connected by a small stream that ran through the property that would become the Silver Lake Cemetery. The 1906 *Borough of Richmond* topographic survey depicts a small pond in the north-central portion of Silver Lake Cemetery.² That map also indicates that a dirt road ran east-west through the entire property in the vicinity of an existing paved walkway that is located in the western half of the cemetery.

The 1906 topographic map also depicts two buildings on the cemetery property: a 1.5-story frame building near the entrance to the cemetery on Victory Boulevard (which was known as Richmond Turnpike before World War I) and a small frame barn in the extreme northwestern corner of the cemetery. According to representatives from the HFBA, the 1.5-story frame building was used as a caretaker's cottage and was destroyed by fire in the late 1980s. The frame barn does not appear on historic maps published after 1907 and it appears that the caretaker's cottage may have been expended to the north at an unknown date. An undated map of the cemetery in the files of HFBA depicts a small structure with

¹ Historic maps identify the cemetery as either 4 or 4.5 acres; the NYCity map (<http://gis.nyc.gov/doitt/nycitymap/>) identifies the property as 5.16 acres. Additional property therefore appears to have been added to the rear of the cemetery, which may explain why the cemetery's central path does not continue to the eastern boundary of the burial ground.

² As requested by EKLA, these maps were collected by AKRF after an on-site meeting on April 23, 2012, and distributed to the project team.

bathrooms for men and women to the north of the cottage. Aerial photographs of the cemetery taken in 1924 and 1951³ are not at a sufficiently high resolution to provide any information about these structures or the condition of the tombstones at the cemetery, although they do show the gradual spread of trees across the property.

Several historic photographs of the cemetery are available at the New York Public Library.⁴ Taken in 1940, these views depict the caretaker's cottage in addition to the arch that originally covered the cemetery's main entrance gates (a smaller entrance led to the front of the caretaker's cottage). In two of the photographs, several headstones with no visible engraving are depicted leaning against the front gate of the cemetery. An article about the 1907 Tombstone Cutters Strike published in the *New York Times* indicates that a shop was located at Silver Lake Cemetery. Maps on file at the HFBA show that this shop was located in the northwest corner of the property in the vicinity of the former frame barn. A photograph of the caretaker's cottage taken in the late-1980s is also on file at the New York City Municipal Archives (image "dof_5_00593_0785").⁵

C. BURIAL CUSTOMS AT SILVER LAKE CEMETERY

In a preliminary investigation into the burial customs used at Silver Lake Cemetery in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, no information was uncovered to confirm or deny the practice of traditional Jewish burials at Silver Lake. Jewish law dictates that individuals be buried in a white linen or cotton shroud and placed within an undecorated pine casket (Greenberg 1983). Burials occur within one day of death and embalming and cremation are forbidden (ibid). As stated by Rabbi Elchonon Zohn during the pre-scoping workshop held by EKLA and the HFBA, metal fasteners are not used to construct the coffins used for traditional Jewish burials.

Late-19th century descriptions of Jewish burials indicate that these customs were in use at that time. An article published in 1895 in the *New York Tribune* described a carpenter's shop on the Lower East Side of Manhattan where coffins were produced. The unlined coffins, which the article states were used by Orthodox Jews of all economic classes in New York City, were described as having rough, unplanned edges. Many immigrants were buried in plain linen or cotton burial robes that they brought with them when they emigrated from their place of origin (ibid). In some Orthodox Jewish burials in the late-19th century, a "pillow made of earth in a linen bag" was also placed within the coffin beneath the head of the deceased (*New York Tribune* 1896). During the late-19th century, however, many Reform Jews had more elaborate funerals, which included more expensive coffins (*New York Tribune* 1895 and 1896).

The cemetery's records appear to indicate that some areas of the cemetery maintained the custom of burying men in a separate section than women and children, and many sections had separate burial areas for children. In the Chevra Kadischa section—the only section for which there is an existing map of burials—this distinction appears to have been maintained initially, although some burials dating to the late-20th century appear to be those of married couples interred in adjacent plots. However, some records indicate that females were buried in male sections of the cemetery or vice-versa.

There were numerous instances where an individual was initially interred elsewhere and later re-interred at the Silver Lake Cemetery. For example, Charles Siegel, a soldier killed in the Philippines in March 1900, was eventually re-buried at Silver Lake Cemetery in July 1901 (*New York Times* 1901).⁶ Another individual, Abraham Lieberman, died in a city hospital and was buried in the city's Potter's Field before his family was alerted to his death and had Mr. Lieberman reburied at Silver Lake Cemetery (*New York*

³ Visible through the NYCity Map published by the City of New York: <http://gis.nyc.gov/doitt/nycitymap/>

⁴ Available at: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?731379f>

⁵ Available at: <http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet>. This image can be purchased from the Municipal Archives for a fee.

⁶ Mr. Siegel is listed in the original cemetery records available on Ancestry.com as a soldier from Manila and he was buried in Section 20, Row 1, Grave 1. He is not listed in the index provided by the HFBA.

Times 1904).⁷ In addition, cemetery records published on Ancestry.com make note of other individuals that were disinterred from the city's Potter's Field or other cemeteries and reburied at Silver Lake. It is unclear how the remains were reburied and if they were transferred to a new pine coffin for reburial if one was not already in use.⁸ It is also possible that some individuals may have been embalmed or buried non-traditional clothing if they were first interred elsewhere and later reinterred at the Silver Lake Cemetery. Additional historic research into the history and use of Silver Lake Cemetery may result in the collection of additional data which could provide more information on burial practices in place at the cemetery in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

D. RESULTS OF THE GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY REPORT

In April 2012, Nova Geophysical Services completed a non-invasive geophysical survey of the cemetery. The survey resulted in the identification of 120 rows of marked and unmarked graves on the southern half of the cemetery and 103 rows of marked and unmarked graves on the northern half. Foundation remnants associated with the former caretaker's cottage were also identified. Because of the close spacing of the burials, individual graves could not be identified in all locations, although the rows of burials were easily detected. Nova placed orange ribbon along the cemetery property to identify the unmarked rows of burials. A survey map outlining the burial rows identified through the survey was prepared by Nova and was reviewed by AKRF. Nova's final report also refers to three figures (1. Site Location Map; 2. Geophysical Survey Map; and 3. Geophysical Survey Earth Map) and two attachments (A. Geophysical Images – Site Photos and B. GPR Images), which were not available for the purposes of this analysis.

Throughout the cemetery, anomalies consistent with concrete structures—thought by Nova to be fallen headstones—were identified between 6 and 12 inches below the ground surface. The burials themselves were identified at depths ranging between 1 and 4 feet below ground surface. The rows of burials at Silver Lake Cemetery as depicted on the map that was prepared by Nova are of inconsistent widths, with some situated at very close intervals (presumably those used for the interment of children and infants), others at greater intervals (presumably adult burials). While most of the rows are relatively parallel, others diverge at odd angles, especially in the north half of the cemetery. Many rows of unmarked burials were identified during the course of the survey throughout the cemetery, including to the south of the former caretaker's cottage (these burials may represent Section 1, which is not marked on most maps of the cemetery). The only area where burials were not identified was to the north of the former cottage, which was presumably a work area and the location of a barn and stonecutter's shop during the cemetery's period of use.

E. REVIEW OF AVAILABLE HISTORIC RECORDS

The burials in the digital database are classified according to section, sub-section (as stated earlier, many sections are divided into separate burial areas for men, women, and children), row number, and grave number. The index provided by HFBA was prepared by archivist Jeanne Swadosh, who created the database using data from the cemetery's original records, a field survey of marked graves (it was impossible to check unmarked graves against the records), and documentary research (e.g., examining death certificates on file at the New York City Municipal Archives).

According to Ms. Swadosh, some records were easy to correlate with existing headstones at the cemetery. However, others did not appear to correspond to the numbering system used in the original records or gaps were observed in the sequence. In many situations, most involving the burial of children or infants, new graves (often unmarked) appear to have been inserted between existing graves. Because the cemetery was rapidly filled (thousands of individuals were interred over a span of less than 20 years), the accuracy of the historic records is unclear and the records may not accurately represent the locations of certain decedents, especially those in unmarked graves. In addition, some of the data included in the database

⁷ Mr. Lieberman is listed in an HFBA index of burials as "Abraham," however, original records published on Ancestry.com list his first name as "Jacob."

⁸ Pine coffins were customarily used at the city's burial grounds.

may be the result of clerical or typographical errors. For example, more than 100 burials are listed as being located in “Section 81” and more than 50 are listed in “Section 71,” neither of which appears to exist. Some of these records were cross-referenced with the original records, and those listed as “81” appear to be located within the children’s area of Section 8, and some or all of those listed as “71” appear to be located in Section 7A and/or Section 7B.⁹ These errors may be the result of an inability of the database software to export section numbers that included letters.

The accuracy of the records is further limited by the fact that the sequential numbering system was not applied in a uniform manner, as stated by Ms. Swadosh. The sequential grave numbers assigned to each row begin at the northern and southern ends of the cemetery and increase towards the concrete path that runs through the center. To account for the insertion of additional graves into the already-established matrix, the index occasionally includes negative numbers or fractions as grave numbers. While some of the historic maps in the files of the HFBA depict planned sections or rows, there is no scaled map that depicts the boundaries of the individual graves, rows, or sections, with the exception of the Chevra Kadisha section, near the southwest corner of the cemetery.

F. SUMMARY OF PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

The undated map of the sections of the cemetery provided by the HFBA proves that during the cemetery’s period of use, the orderly sections laid out after the cemetery’s founding in 1892 (and seen on the Bostwick survey made that year) were not maintained. As originally laid out, the sections appear to have been numbered sequentially and the central path served to divide the cemetery into distinct north and south halves. Section 1 was located near the cemetery’s entrance on the northern side of the central path, and section numbers in the north half increased to the east until Section 7 was reached at the eastern end of the cemetery. Section 8 was located near the cemetery’s entrance on the southern side of the path, and the section numbers increased along the southern half to the east until Section 15 was reached at the cemetery’s southeast corner.

The undated map and the cemetery records show that while the original numbering system was probably used initially, additional numbered sections were inserted out of sequence. For example, Sections 20 and 22 are located between Sections 9 and 12 and Sections labeled 6½, 24, and 26 are located between Sections 3 and 4. Likewise, the southeast corner of the cemetery is made up of Sections 12 through 19, however, these are not organized in a linear fashion and some L-shaped sections wrap around other square or rectangular sections. The extent to which the sections are currently delineated on the cemetery property is unclear, although survey monuments that mark the boundaries of the sections are identified on the 1892 Bostwick map and it is possible that some of those may still be extant on site.

According to the database, the oldest burials (dating to 1893) are located in Sections 14 and 15, which appear to have been set aside for the burial of adult women and men, respectively (this corresponds with both the records and the undated cemetery map provided by HFBA). Burials therefore began in the southeast corner of the cemetery. A sub-section for the burial of children within Section 14 appears to have been in use later in 1893. Sections 7 (in the northeast corner of the cemetery) and 12 and 13 (west of Section 14) appear to have been in use by 1895, although Sections 14 and 15 were still in active use. While the older sections remained active through the early 20th century, the database depicts a clear trend of burials from east (the oldest graves) to west (the most recent) on both the northern and southern sides of the cemetery. The early use of the sections numbered 7, 14, and 15 at the eastern end of the cemetery is consistent with the original numbering scheme established in 1892. It therefore appears that the additional sections were inserted at a later date, likely in response to an increased need for burial space during the cemetery’s period of active use.

⁹ The majority of these burials appear to have taken place between 1894 and 1899. The records for this period are not available on Ancestry.com, and only one name from those listed within “Section 71” could be matched to the digital records. That individual, Markel Goldberg, was buried in Section 7A in 1900.

G. RECOMMENDATIONS

The lack of a scaled map of the cemetery's sections makes it difficult to correlate the historic data from the cemetery's database to the burial rows identified by Nova. Because of the overlapping sections, inconsistency in the numbering of rows, and possibly clerical or typographical errors, a greater number of burial rows is included within the HFBA database than was identified on-site by Nova. In addition, sections were identified by Nova for which no records appear to exist (i.e., the possible Section 1, located to the south of the footprint of the former caretaker's cottage).

To attempt to correlate the records with the burial rows at the cemetery, a preliminary field survey is necessary to determine if the section boundaries can be established. This can be achieved by comparing the information from the database with the topographic survey of the cemetery prepared by Langan Environmental Engineering and a field survey of marked graves. If possible, the section boundaries could be incorporated into Nova's map showing the burial rows. This, along with additional analysis and surveying, could allow for the assignment of numbers to the burial rows identified by Nova in a manner consistent with those used in the historic records.

Because of the lack of uniformity in the numbering sequence, there may be many discrepancies between the records and what is observed in the field. Similarly, while the comparison of the historic records to the data recovered by Nova may result in the identification of some of the individuals in unmarked graves, if the data from the records are not reliable enough, it may be impossible to assign names to graves with certainty. However, if the row-numbering sequence seen in the historic records and in the index provided by the HFBA is consistent with the number of rows identified by Nova, it may be possible to assign names to general rows, if not to specific graves.

Because the burials have been identified at shallow depths (between 1 to 4 feet below ground surface), it is recommended that great care be taken during future landscaping activities at the site to avoid any further disturbance to the ground surface. In addition, it is not recommended that buried headstones be excavated, unless the GPR survey indicates that the human remains are at a great depth below the buried headstone.

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