



SC Historic Preservation Conference
April 25, 2025

Mapping Charleston's Black Burial Grounds

PRESENTED BY ANNA-CATHERINE ALEXANDER,
LAUREL FAY & MADISON LEE

Session Goals

- **Consider** development and climate-related threats to African American burial grounds
- **Evaluate** the methodology behind this project
- **Discuss** this project's relationship to ongoing advocacy

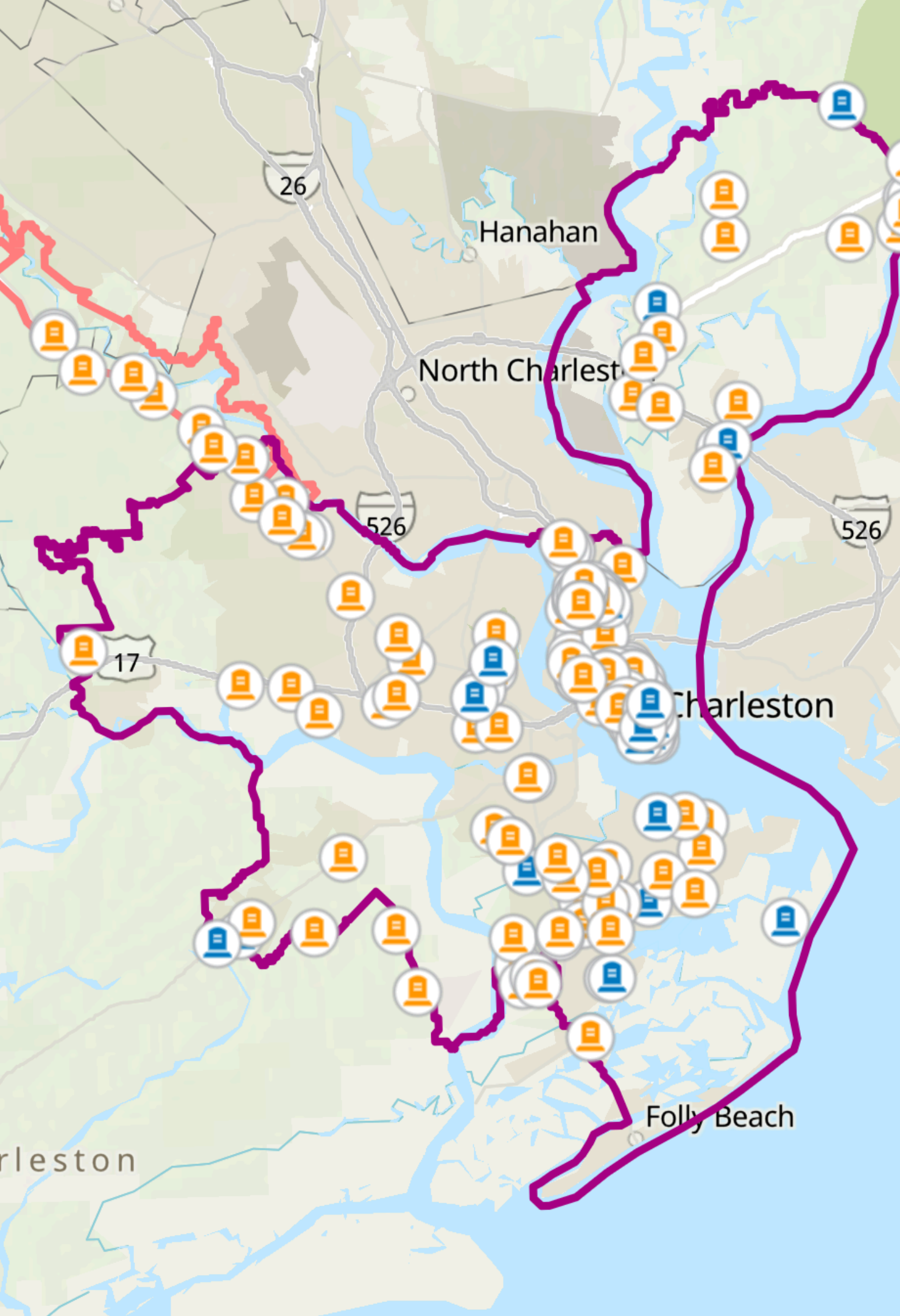
MAPPING CHARLESTON'S BLACK BURIAL GROUNDS



Flooding at Monrovia Cemetery



James Island Listening Session, 2023



Agenda

Topics to be Covered

- Project Introduction & Scope
- Project Phases (I-III)
- Opportunities for Expansion
- Replicating this Project in Your Community
- Q&A

Project Introduction

Impetus of Project

Black burial grounds are under-documented historic, cultural resources. You can't protect what you don't know is there.

The MCBBG Project is a collaborative effort to **identify** and **document** Black burial sites in the City of Charleston.

By assembling a **comprehensive map** of burial grounds, these sacred sites can be better **protected from development**.

Nelliefield Creek Cemetery



Heriot Street Cemetery

Charlestowne Landing African American Cemetery



Project Introduction

FUNDING

National Park Service African
American Civil Rights Grant

TIMELINE

2022-2024 (but ongoing!)

**Dill's Bluff Plantation
Enslaved Cemetery**



Project Introduction

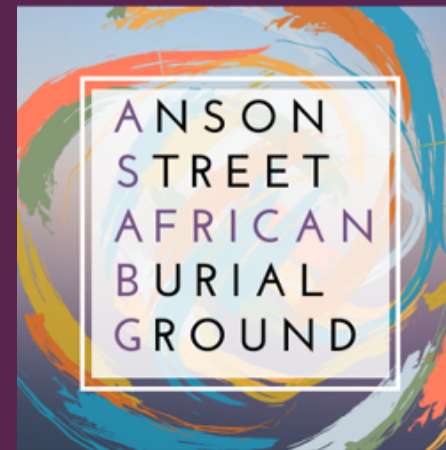
GOALS OF PROJECT

- Engage community members to **identify and document burial grounds of those of African descent** in the City of Charleston.
- Create a **city-wide map** of burial sites to ensure better protection against **development impacts**.
- Improve implementation of City of Charleston **cemetery protection ordinance**.
- Strengthen **collaboration and trust** between descendant communities, residents, preservationists, and City officials to promote sustainable preservation of burial grounds, beyond the grant period.

Project Team

MAPPING CHARLESTON'S BLACK BURIAL GROUNDS

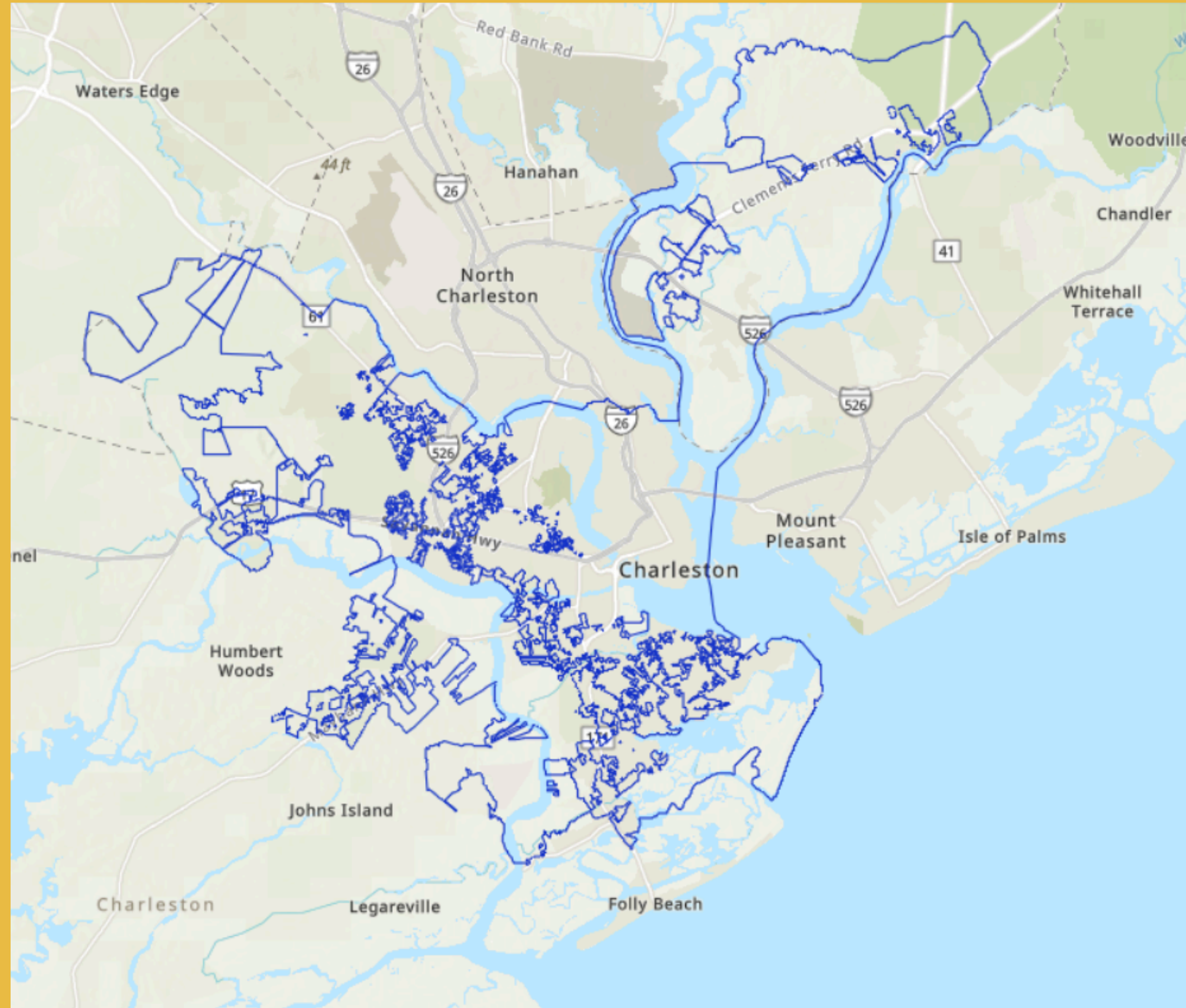
PRESERVATION
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Supporting Partners (To-Date):

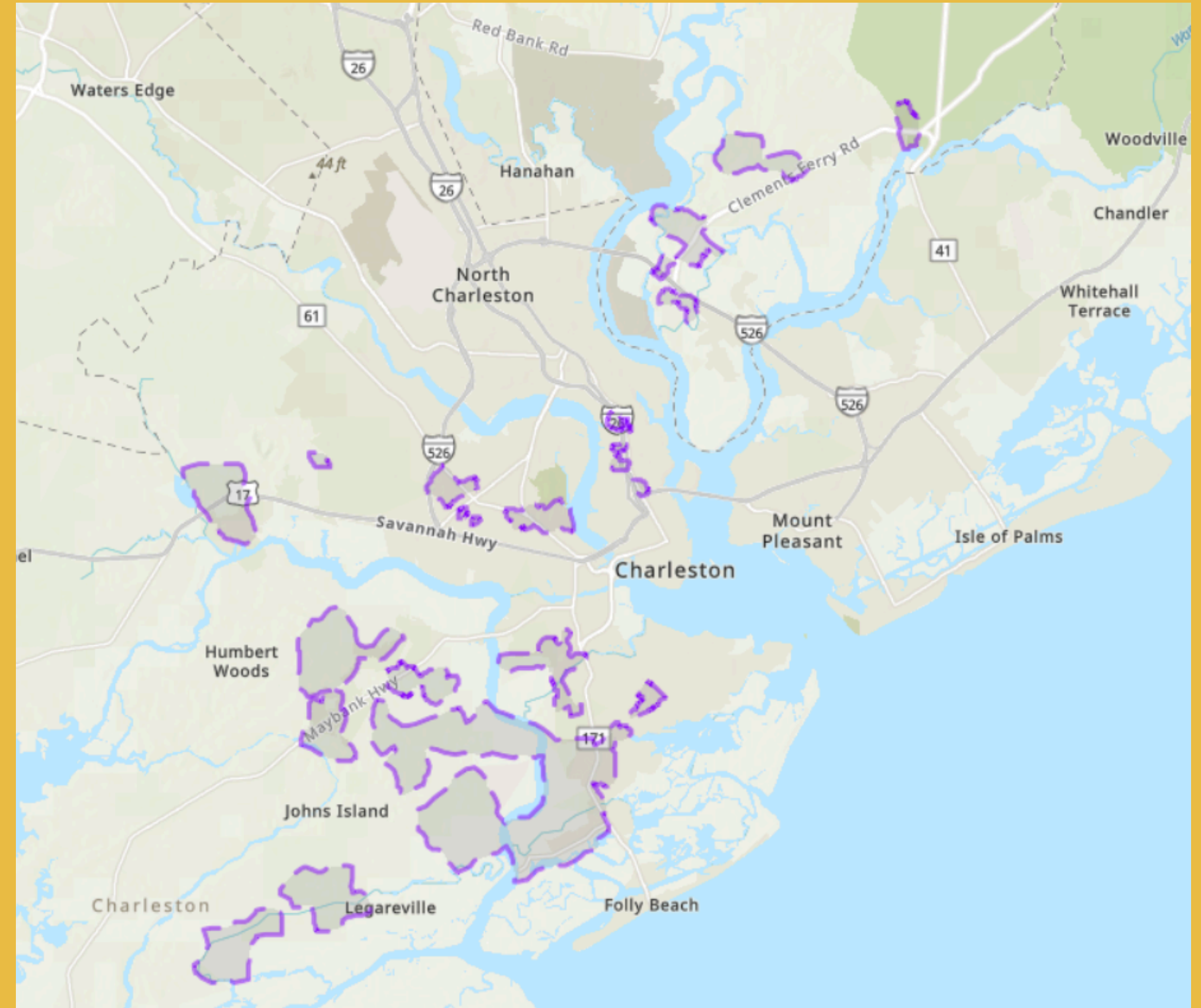
- City of Charleston Mayor's Office
- City of Charleston Department of Planning, Preservation and Sustainability
- International African American Museum (IAAM)
- Charleston Gaillard Center

Project Scope



Charleston City Limits

Where Do We Draw the Line?



**Approx. Location of African American Settlement Communities
(City of Charleston Planning Department)**

Project Scope

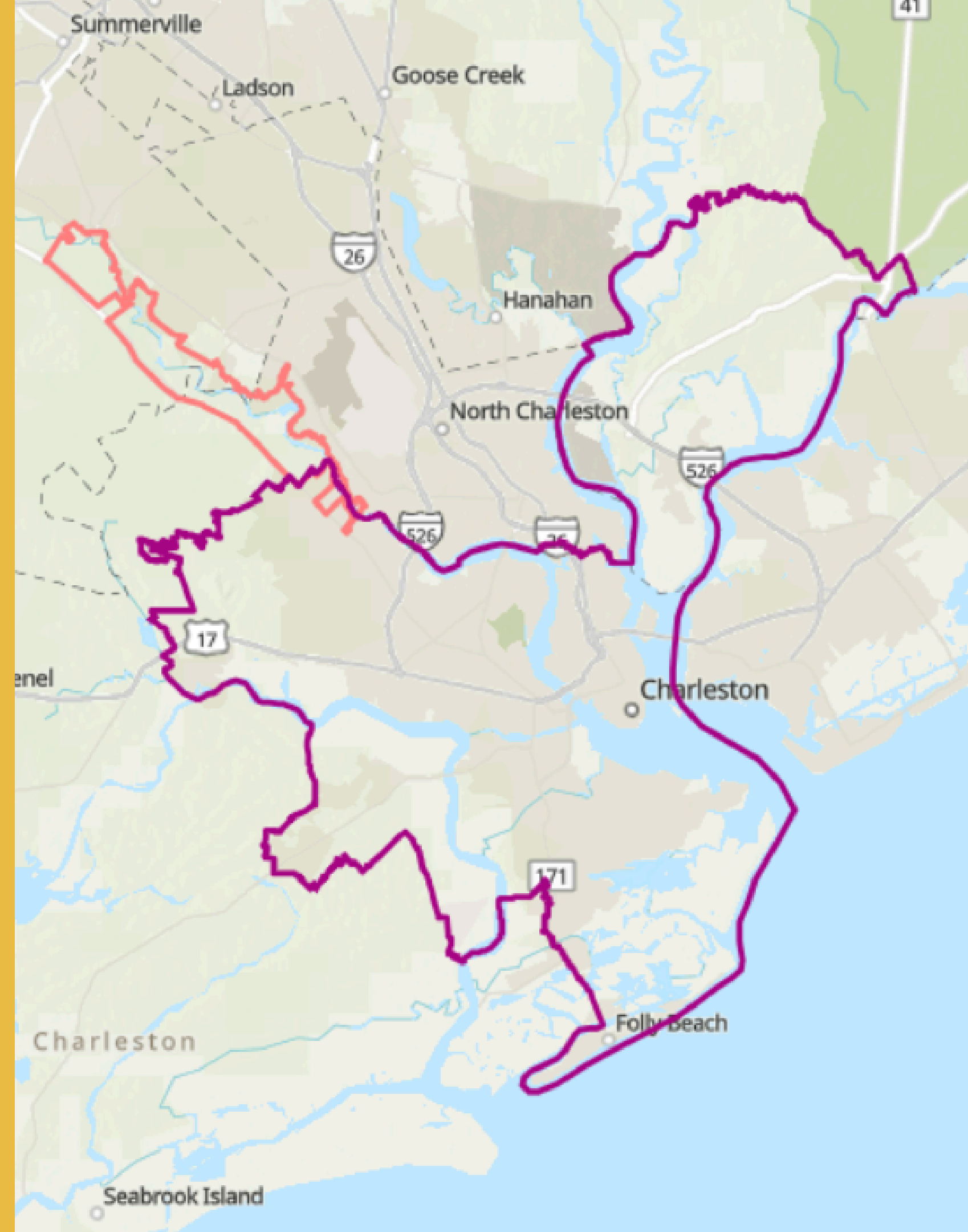
An Inclusive Project Boundary Line

URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARY

An Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) is a zoning tool that limits urban sprawl by designating areas for urban development within the boundary and reserving land outside it for rural use.

ASHLEY RIVER HISTORIC DISTRICT

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Ashley River Historic District showcases centuries of layered history through its historic roadways, landmarks, and cultural landscapes. It is home to two National Historic Landmarks: Drayton Hall and Middleton Place.



Project Scope

Burial Grounds Studied

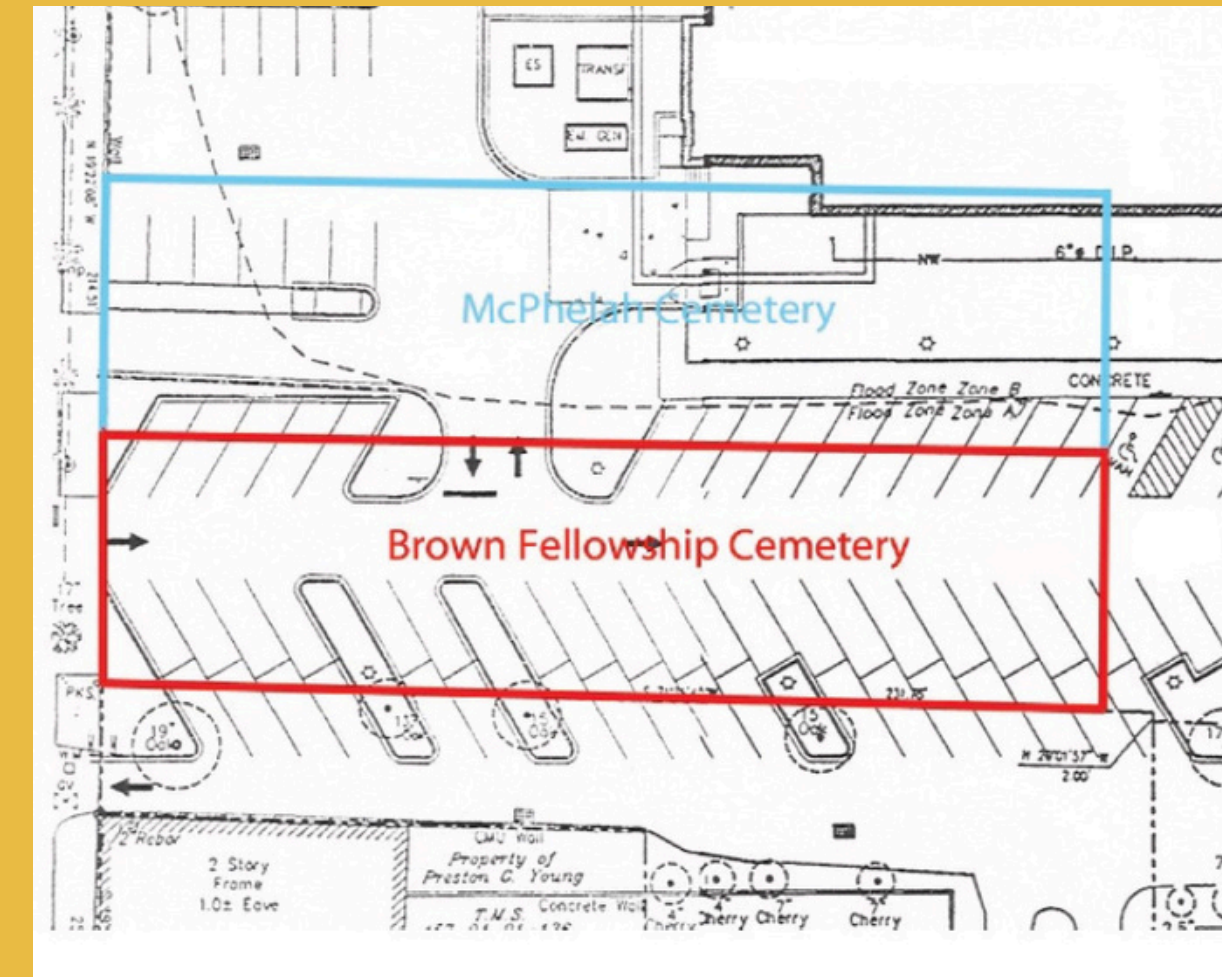
ALL burial grounds, regardless of race
Sites on both **PUBLIC** and **PRIVATE** property



St. Thomas Church Cemetery



Brotherly Association Cemetery



“LOST” BURIAL GROUNDS

GRAVEYARDS

CEMETERIES

A PHASED APPROACH



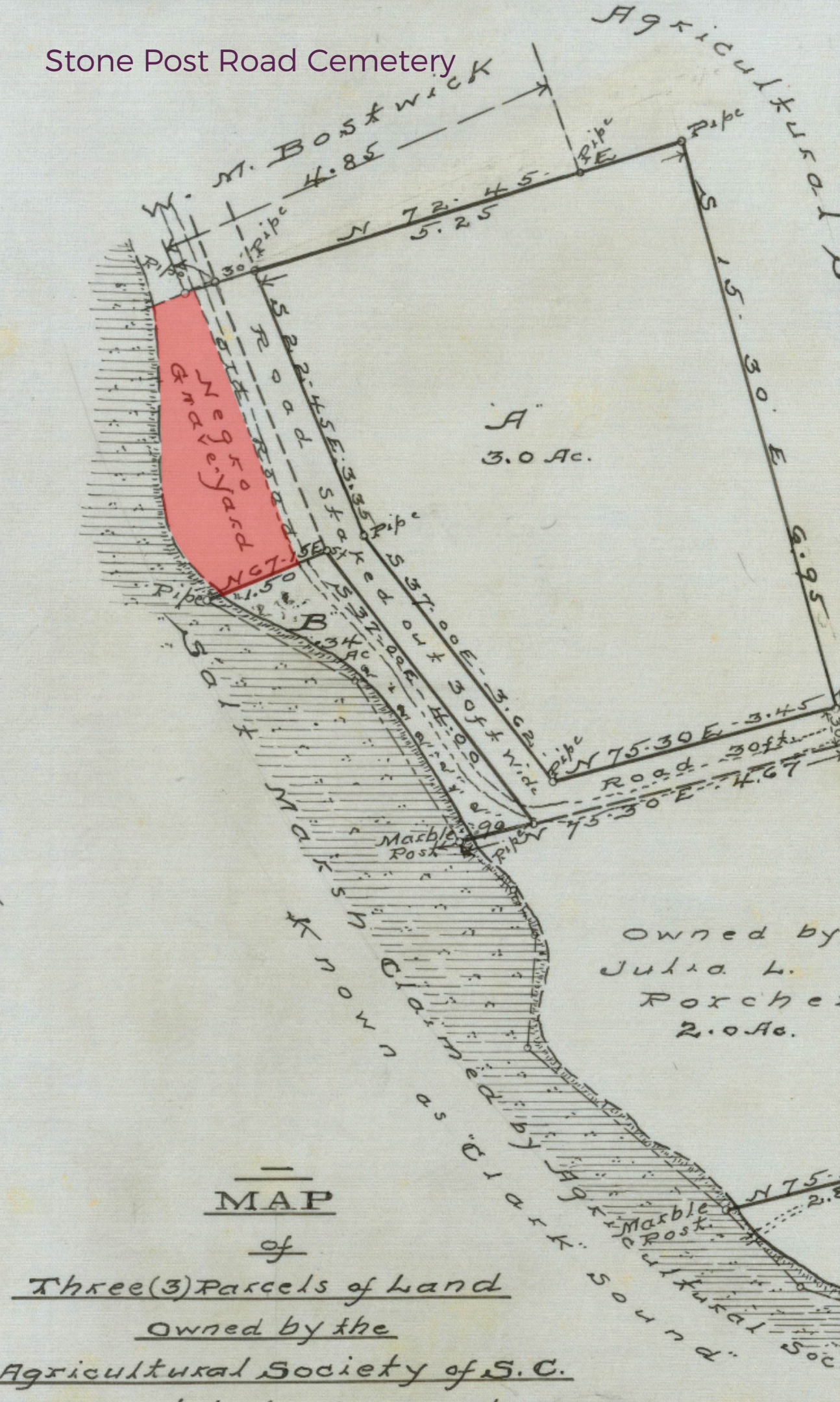
**Initial Research &
Data Gathering**
2022-2023



**Community
Outreach**
2023-2024



**Building & Launching
the Map**
2024



Phase I

Initial Research & Data Gathering

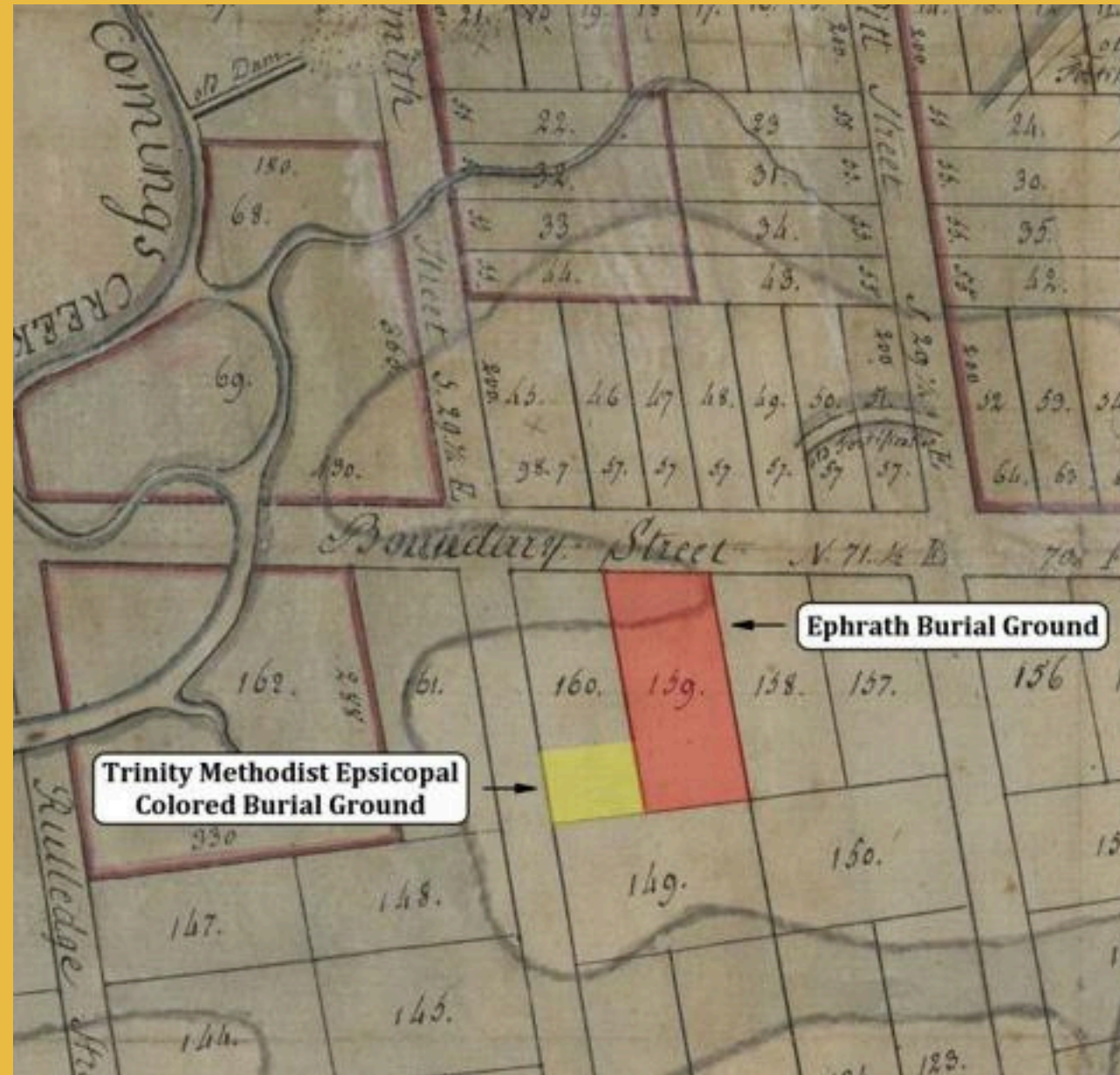
- Combing through existing documentation and research to build upon what has already been done
- Consolidating information into one comprehensive database
- Collecting historic maps, plats, newspaper clippings, and photographs
- Analyzing USGS Topographical Maps
- Yes, even using Google Maps/Street View to find existing cemeteries!

Phase I

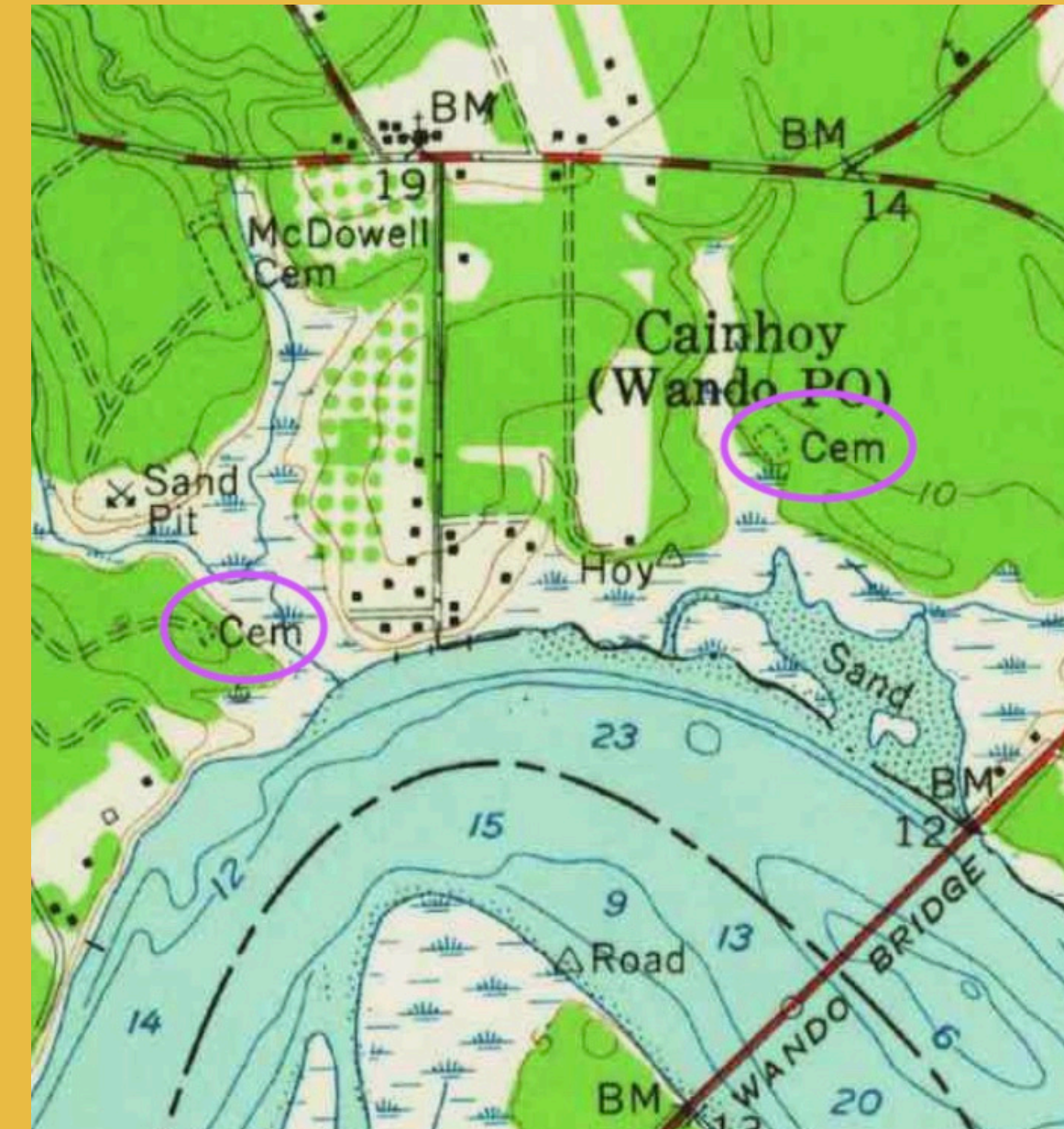
Initial Research & Data Gathering



Rose's Farm Cemetery, labeled as "Negro Cemetery,"
1844 Map



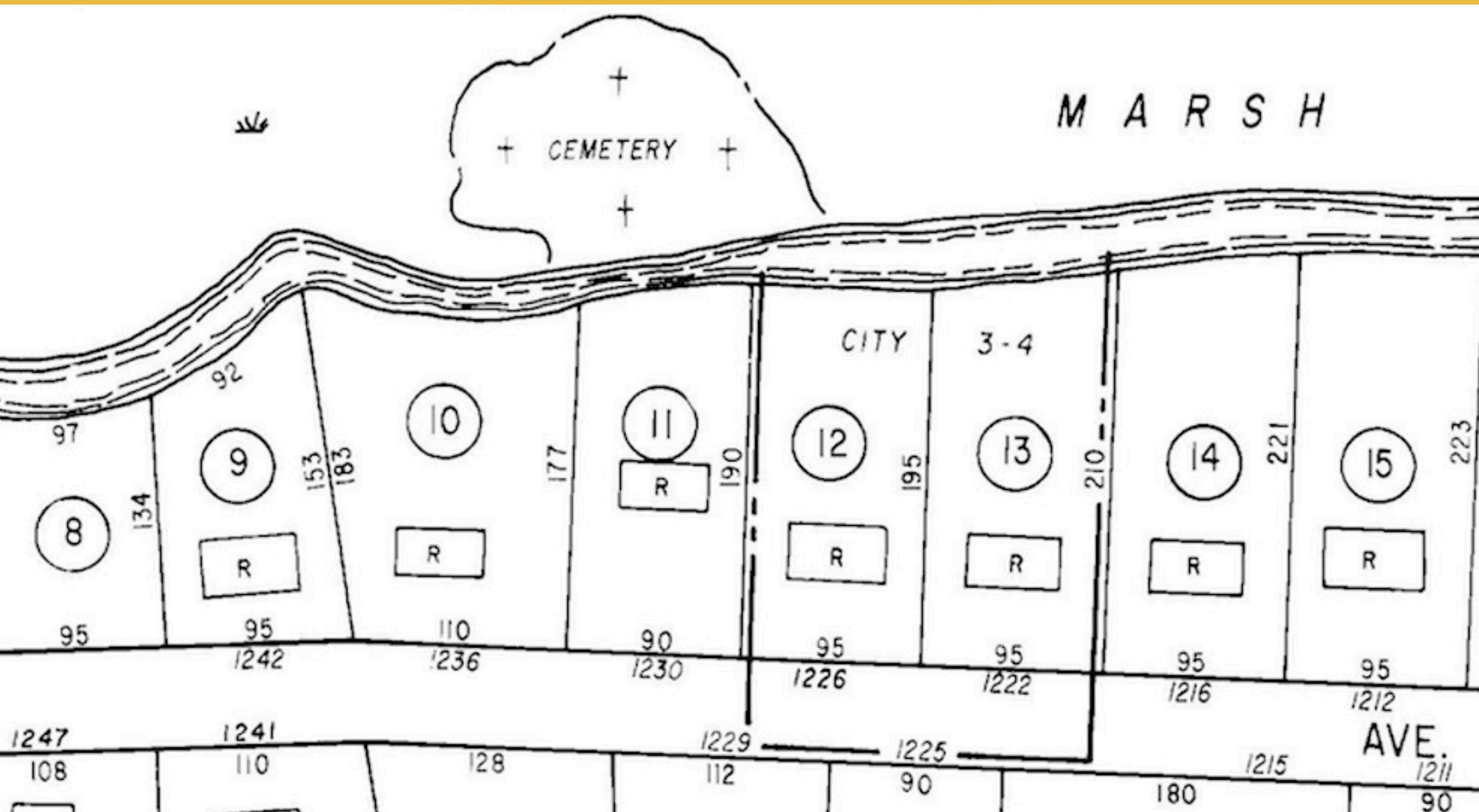
Trinity Methodist Episcopal Colored Burial Ground &
Ephrath Burial Ground, 1798 Plat



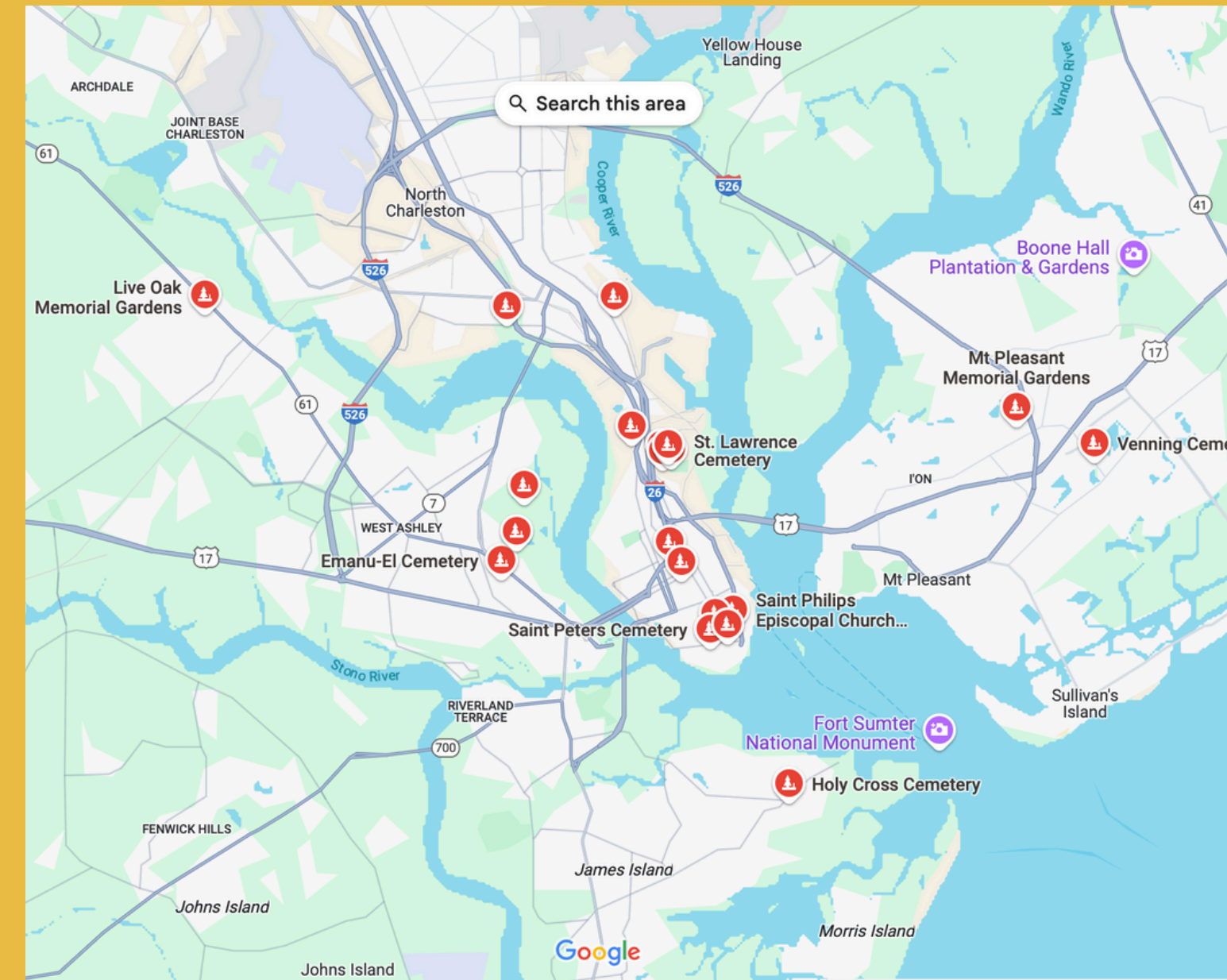
Two unidentified cemeteries in Cainhoy,
1958 USGS Topographical Map

Phase I

Initial Research & Data Gathering



Clark Cemetery, shown behind residential properties on a 1970s tax map



Google Maps search showing far fewer cemeteries than there actually are



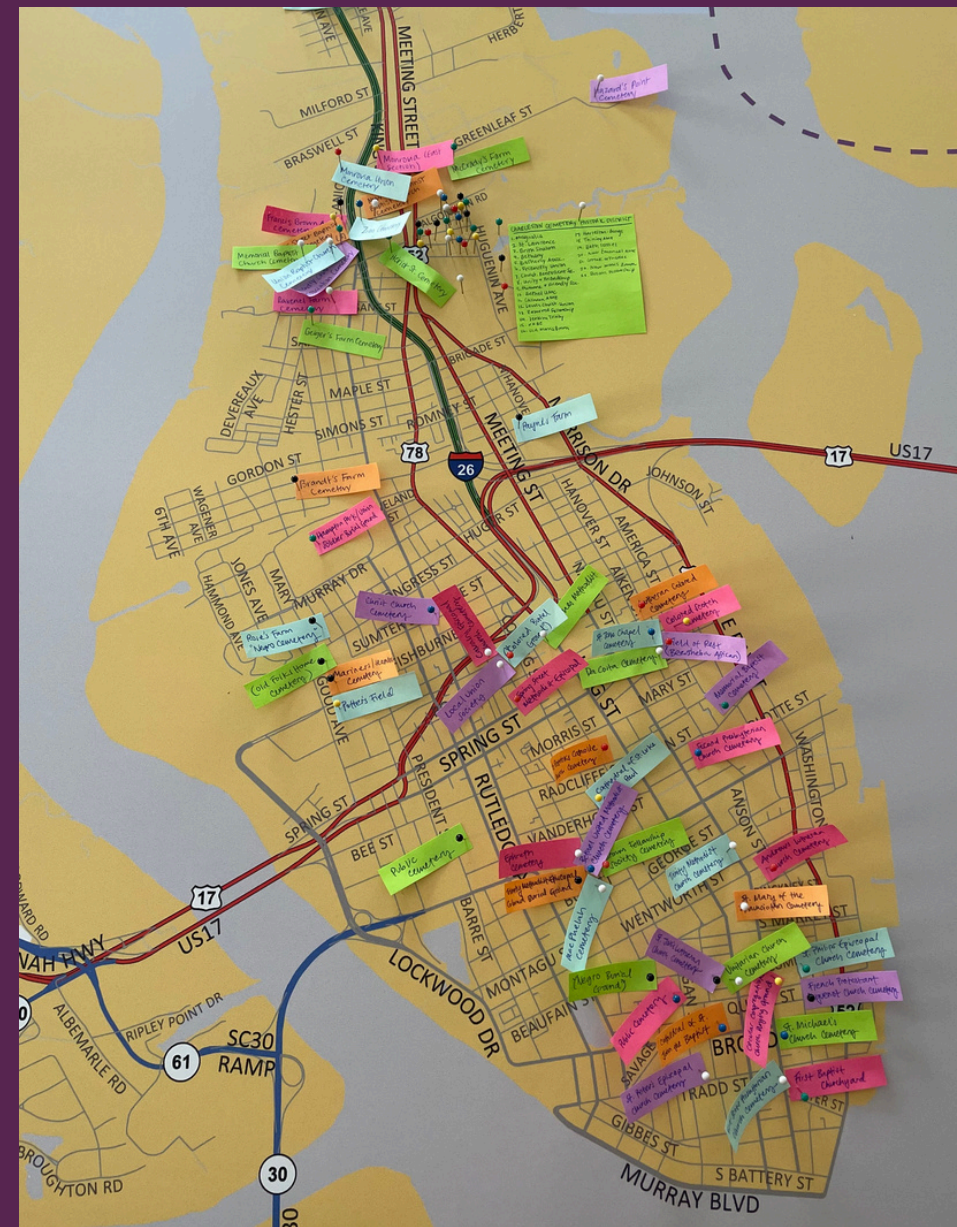
Phase II

Community Outreach

- Listening sessions across the City of Charleston
- Scanning and cataloguing historic maps, plats, surveys, and photographs from family collections
- Documenting community elders' recollections
- Keeping the community informed

Phase II

Community Outreach



Phase II

Community Outreach

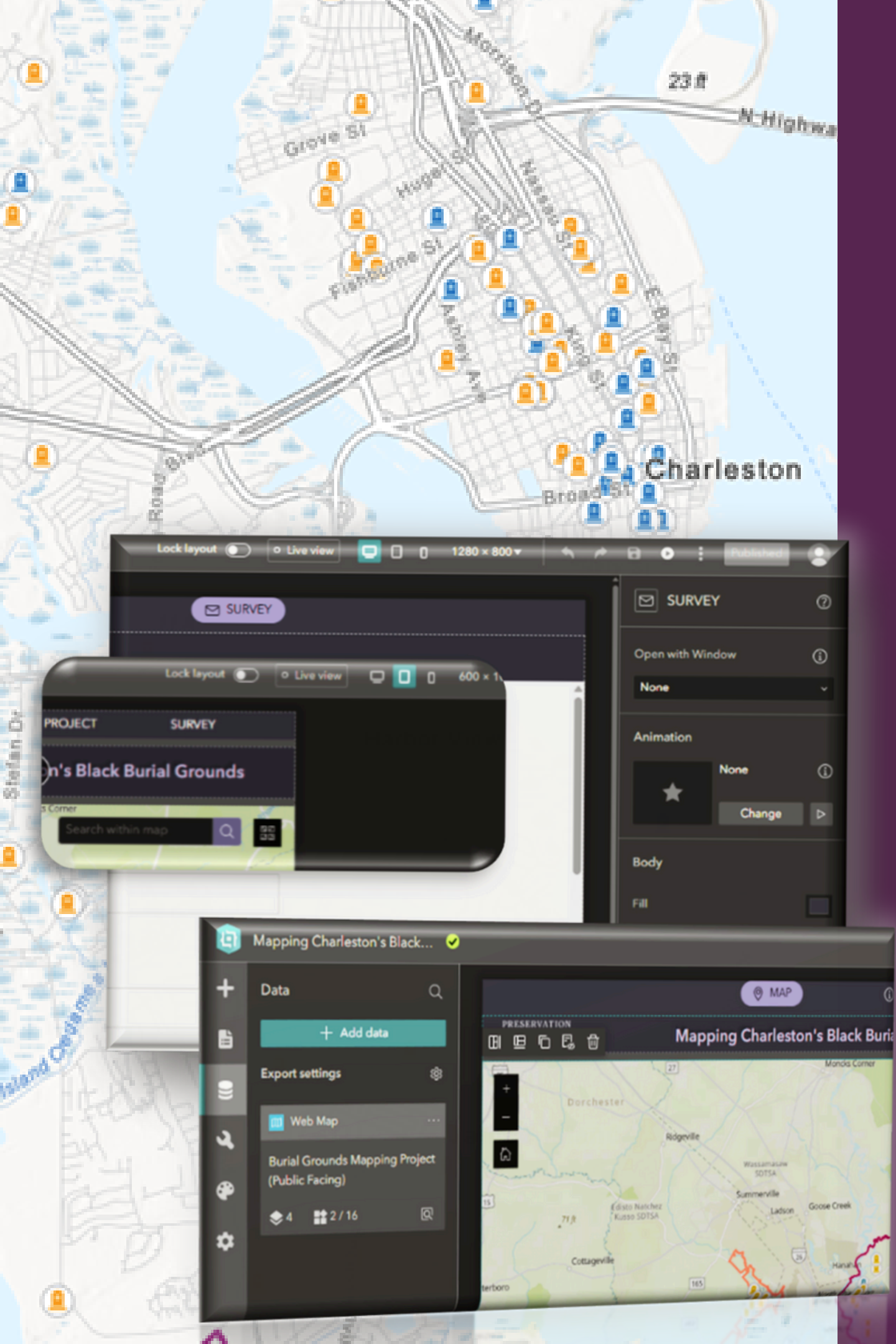


Phase III

Building & Launching the Map

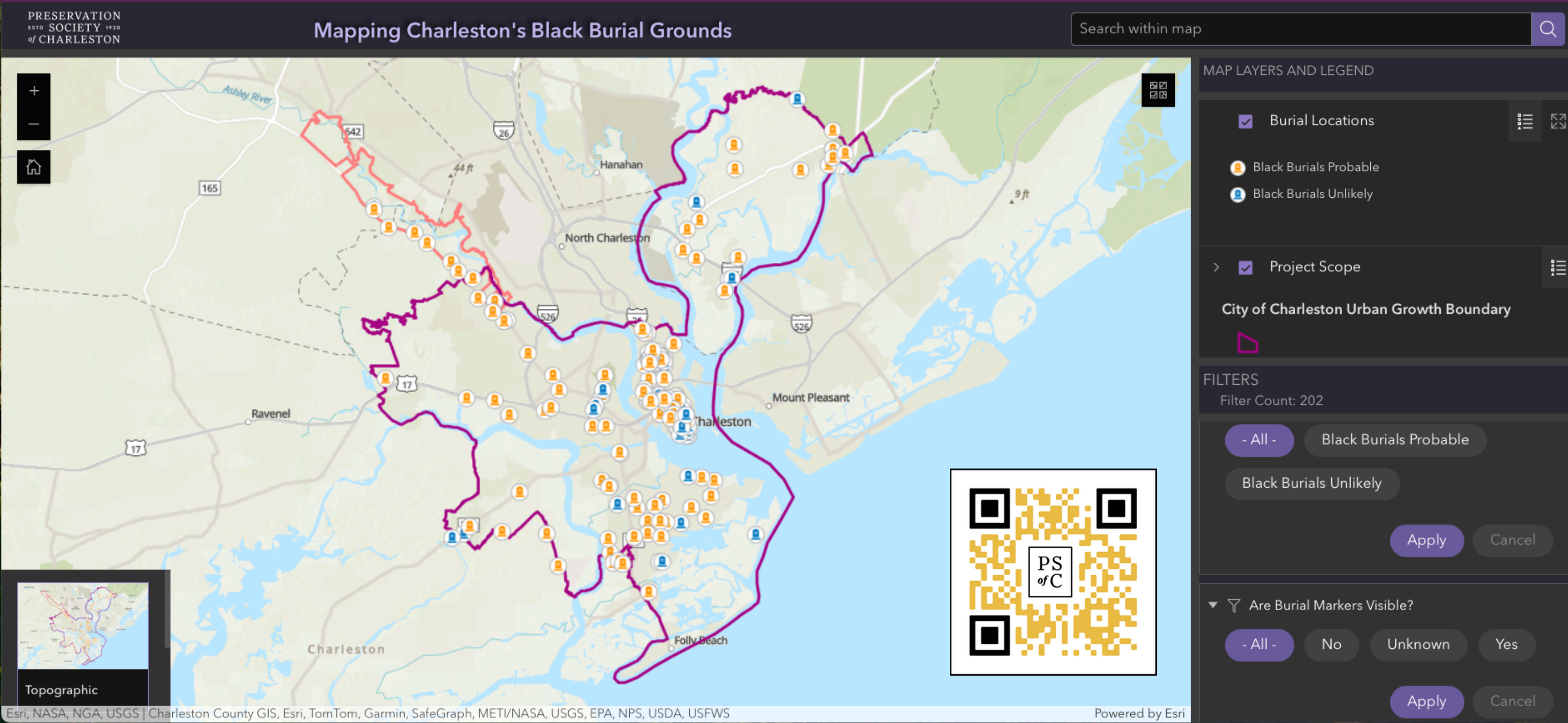
Steps to consider for building the map application:

- Identify Project Goals & Objectives
- Conduct Data Needs Assessment
- Decide on Project-Specific Terminology and Appropriate Layers to Include
- Consider User Experience and Build for Device Accessibility
- Conduct Application Testing



Phase III

Building & Launching the Map



Phase III

Building & Launching the Map



TOTAL

Burial Grounds Mapped (so far)



Black Burials
PROBABLE



Black Burials
UNLIKELY



UNMARKED
Black Burial Grounds

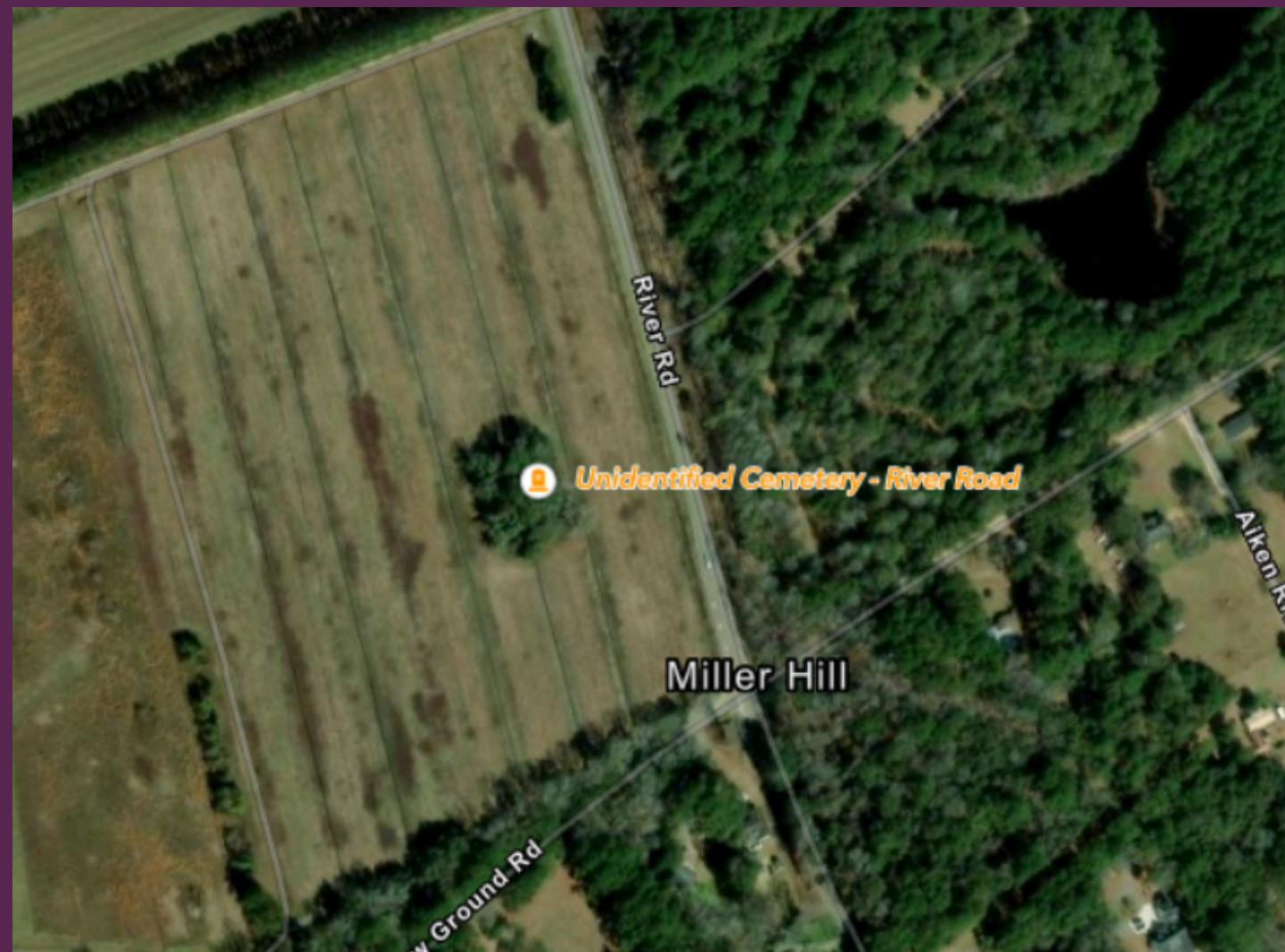
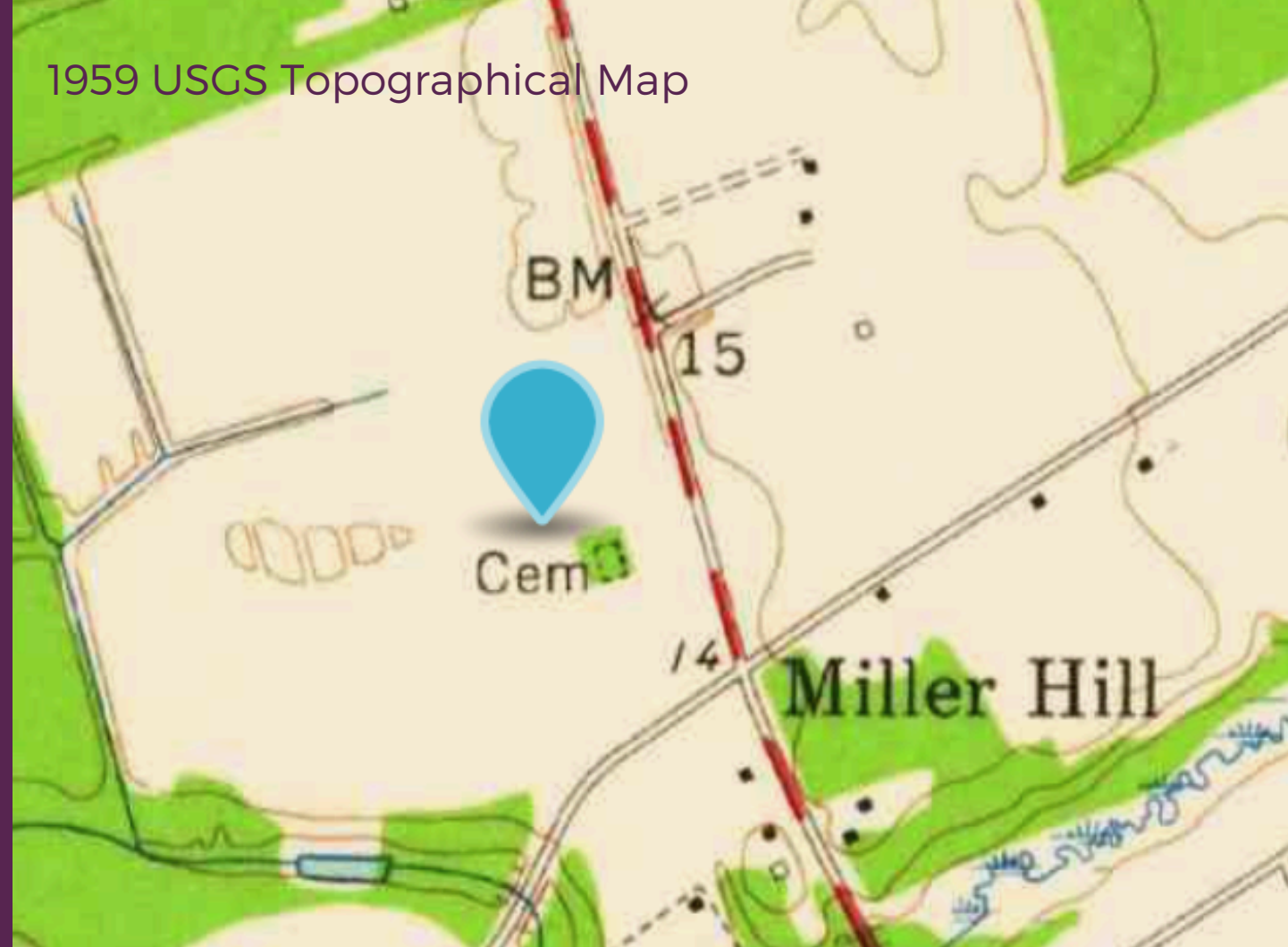


Images, Maps, Plats,
etc. added to Map

Unidentified Burial Ground

Cemetery on River Road

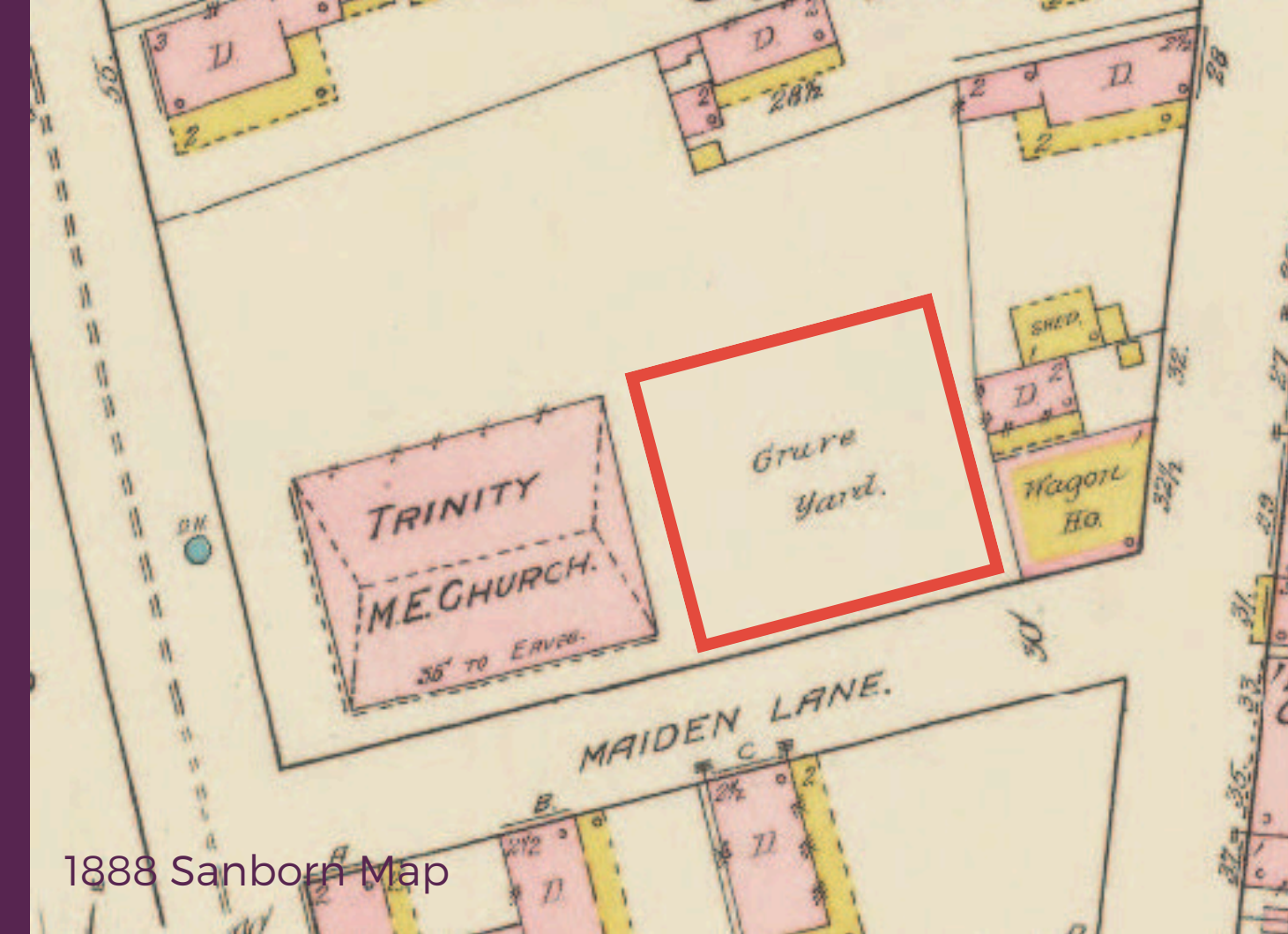
Johns Island, Charleston, SC



Lost Burial Ground

Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church Graveyard

Maiden Lane, Charleston, SC



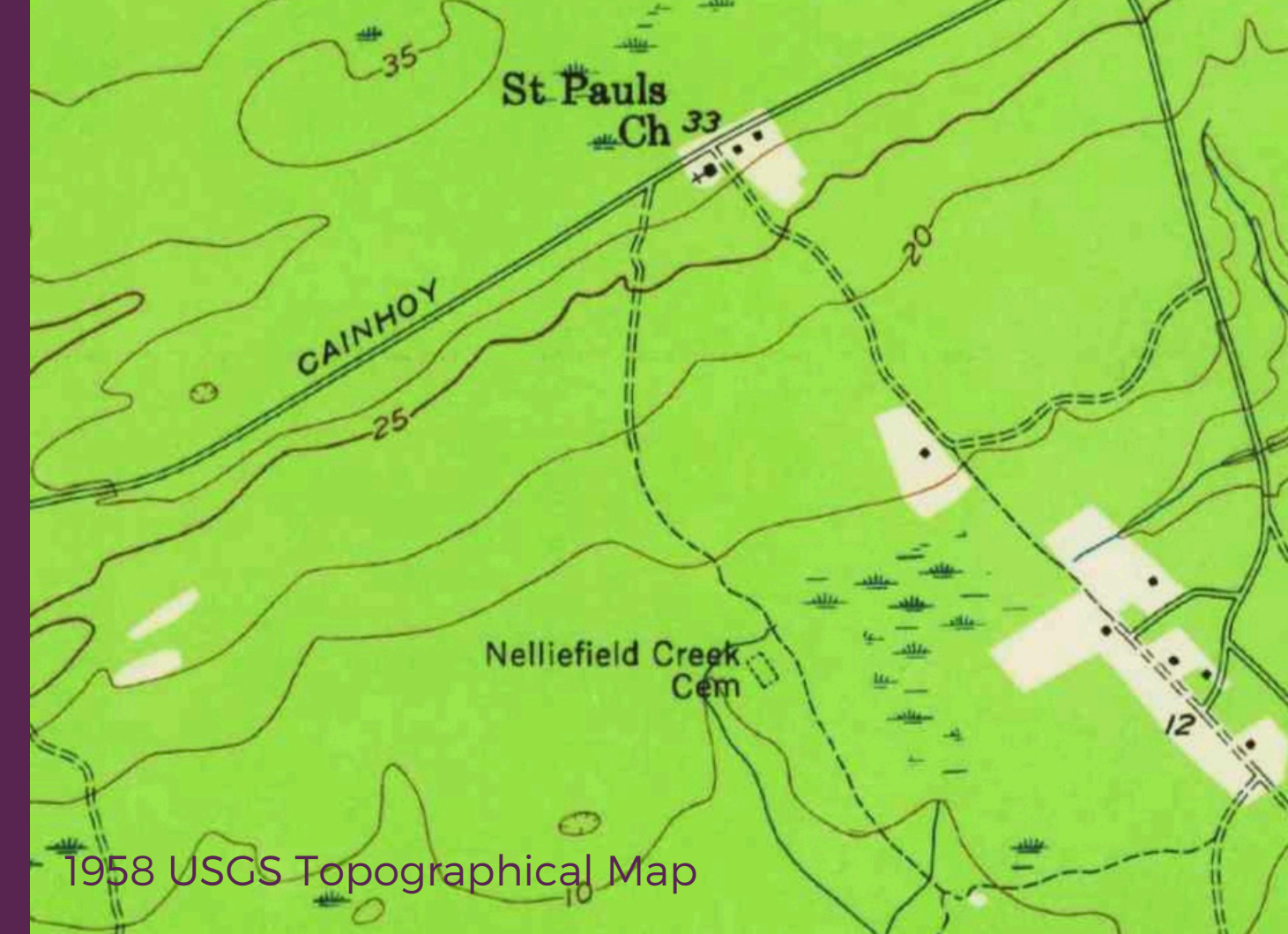
1888 Sanborn Map



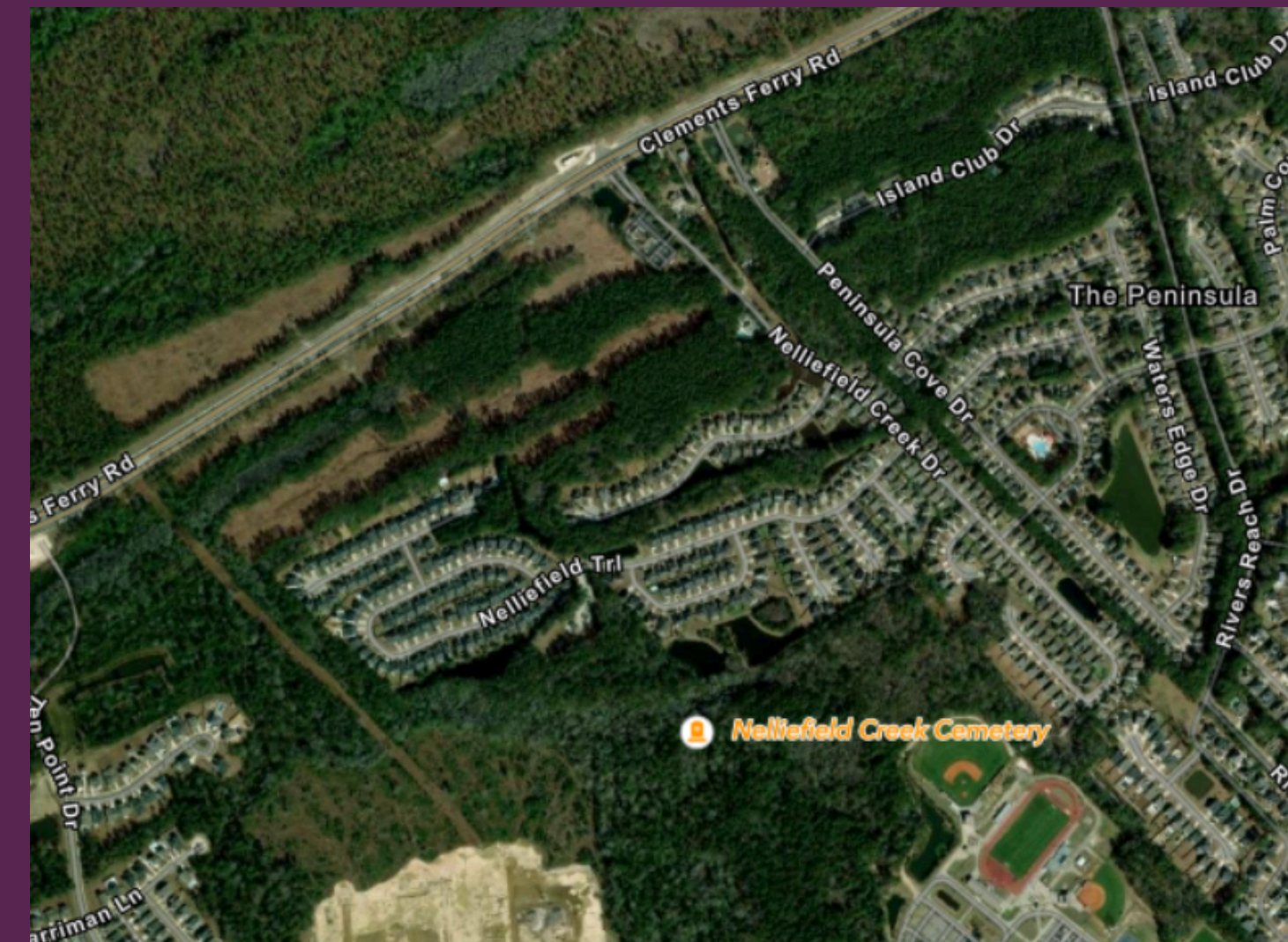
Identified Through Descendent Engagement

Nelliefield Creek Cemetery

Daniel Island, Charleston, SC



1958 USGS Topographical Map



Identified Through Descendent Engagement

Nelliefield Creek Cemetery

Daniel Island, Charleston, SC



Opportunities for Expansion

THIS MAP IS A LIVING RESOURCE!

SMALLER-SCALE IMPROVEMENTS:

- Add layers that include more data on environmental threats, i.e., elevation and topography, flood risks, etc.

THINKING BIGGER:

- Partner with other institutions to **reach new audiences** and create **immersive experiences**
- Expand scope to **Tri-County Area** (Charleston, Berkeley, and Dorchester Counties)
- Share data with state-wide organizations (DNR, SHPO) to assist in creating a **state-wide cemetery map**

Lessons Learned

Reflections on a Two-Year Journey

- The power of personal outreach
- Legacy of generational stewardship
- Need for connectivity
- Value of information sharing



Descendants at Brotherly Association Cemetery



James Island residents connect at listening session



Replicating This Project in Your Community

STEP 1: Identify Project Topic, Scope, Team & Partners

STEP 2: Apply for Funding

- National Park Service African American Civil Rights Grant
- National Trust for Historic Preservation African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund

STEP 3: Gather Relevant Research and Information

STEP 4: Conduct Community Engagement

STEP 5: Design, Build & Launch an Interactive Digital Map

STEP 6: Share Project with Community & Local Government

MCBBG Resources

MAPPING CHARLESTON'S BLACK BURIAL GROUNDS PROJECT

GUIDE

HOW TO USE THE MAP

Descendants' Rights to Access Burial Grounds on Private Property

The most important reference for understanding descendants' rights to access cemeteries on private property is SC. Code of Laws, Section 27-43-310. Access to Cemeteries on Private Property.

This 2002 opinion from the State Attorney General in support of descendants' rights is also helpful in understanding the application of the law:
<https://www.scag.gov/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/02apr2stroup.pdf>

TAKE ACTION

Per state law, the following steps should be taken by descendants to visit ancestors' graves on private property:

1. Identify the property owner.
2. Write a letter to the property owner. You may attach any information about your family history to the letter. The letter should include the following information:
 - a. Identify yourself as a descendant of the deceased.
 - b. State your intent to visit the grave.
 - c. Request the owner's permission to access the grave.
 - d. Offer to pay for any damages or costs incurred.
3. If the owner does not respond or refuses, you may need to seek legal advice.

ACCESS: This law clearly states that "An owner of private property on which a cemetery, burial ground, or grave is located must allow ingress and egress to the cemetery, burial ground, or grave to 'family members and descendants of deceased persons buried on the private property or an agent who has the written permission of family members or descendants.'"

ANCESTRY: Nowhere in the law does it state that descendants must prove their ancestry to access the burial ground in question.

PROCESS: The descendant must provide written notice to the property owner of their intent to access the cemetery and request "a written proposal designating reasonable conditions for the exercise of ingress and egress."

RESPONSE: Property owners are required to respond within 30 days. If there is no response within 30 days, a descendant "may institute a proceeding in the magistrates court of the county in which the cemetery, burial ground, or grave is located, in granting relief to either party, the magistrate may set the frequency, hours, duration, or other conditions of the ingress and egress."

PRESERVATION SOCIETY 1920 of CHARLESTON

What Can I Do If a Cemetery is Not Being Maintained?

- Contact the Cemetery Owner or Management**
Reach out to the owner or management of the cemetery to address the maintenance issues. They may be unaware of the problem and willing to take action.
- Contact Your Elected Official**
City, County, and/or State representatives need to be informed about sites in need of maintenance. Per SC Law Section 6-1-35, Preservation and protection of cemeteries, local governments are "authorized to use public resources to preserve and protect any cemetery located within their jurisdiction" by using public resources to such as placing signs, markers, fencing, etc. features to identify and aid in the preservation and protection of the cemetery.
<https://tinyurl.com/bdh6dk7e>
- Coordinate Community or Volunteer Efforts**
Organize or participate in a community effort to maintain cemeteries. Many communities have volunteer groups that maintain cemeteries. Contact local non-profit organizations and municipal staff to learn more.
- Take Legal Action**
If the cemetery is not being maintained and the owner or management is not responsive, you may need to take legal action. Consult with a lawyer to explore your options.

USING FIND-A-GRAVE

SCAN THE QR CODE TO GET TO FINDAGRAVE.COM

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH FIND-A-GRAVE?

- LOCATE THE BURIALS OF ANCESTORS OR OTHER PERSONS OF INTEREST
- ADD PHOTOS
- SUGGEST CORRECTIONS AND ADDITIONS TO EXISTING MEMORIALS

LOCATE A CEMETERY

You can locate the cemetery by clicking the "Cemetery" tab at the top of the page, and then inputting the cemetery's name and location (City, County, State, or Country) in the search engine.

If you are unable to find the cemetery you are looking for, the cemetery may not be entered in the Find-A-Grave database yet.

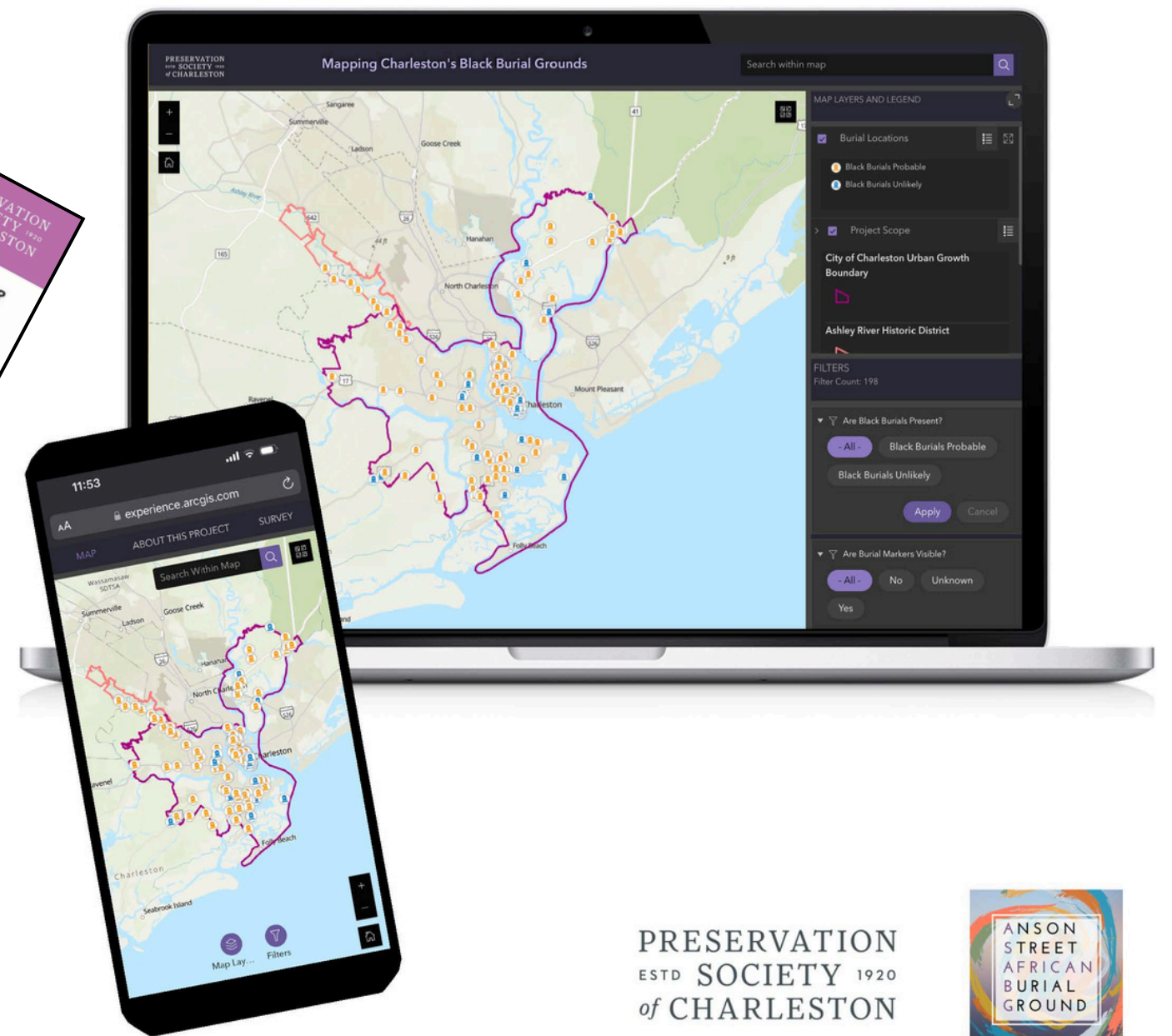
You can add the cemetery by clicking the "Add a Cemetery" button.

SEARCH MEMORIALS

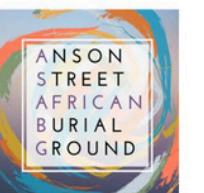
By clicking the "Memorial" tab, you can search for loved ones by entering their information (first name, last name, birth year, death year, etc.). Click "Search."

If you are unable to find the memorial you are looking for, the memorial may not be entered in the Find A Grave database yet.

You can add the memorial by clicking the "Add a Memorial" button.



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Questions?



MAPPING CHARLESTON'S BLACK BURIAL GROUNDS

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