

Marquette anthropologist opposes disturbing cemetery

By Janice Kayser
Staff Writer

Marquette University anthropologist Dr. Norman Sullivan questions whether digging up Milwaukee County Cemetery to make way for the detention basin is a wise decision.

"If there are thousands buried in that cemetery, they're crazy to open it up," he said.

Sullivan and Marquette are keepers of the remains of about 1,600 people found when construction workers unearthed a burial site on the County Grounds, near the now demolished nurses residence hall facing Wisconsin Avenue in 1992.

Digging had already begun on the site to make way for an addition to Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital when a construction worker blew the whistle three days after work began. Construction halted for months as archaeologists sifted through the soil.

Research of unearthed remains

Sullivan and select graduate students have been researching the remains for the last nine years to determine who the unnamed paupers were and what kind of conditions they lived in prior to their death.

The analysis of the remains has not cost the county a penny; Sullivan volunteered his and Marquette's services to store and analyze the remains from the burial site.

Costs to the county, however, for excavation, analysis and reburial of the remains of the county cemetery could be outrageous, Sullivan said.

Advises against more excavation

"I think it would be a dreadful mistake to excavate the area for many reasons, including cost," he said. "And I can't believe they will find a group able to handle the sheer volume of the remains."

He points over his shoulder to a large wall in his office. The wall is about 40 feet long and 15 feet high and is covered with small brown boxes. Most of the boxes are

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marked with the words "infant" and number codes.

"Those boxes contain the remains of 600 babies that were found at the site," he said. The infant cemetery was in use from 1880 to 1925, Sullivan said.

"After studying them, we have determined that the median age for death for most of them was approximately 3 to 6 months and they mostly appear to have died primarily from neglect."

Left at foundling hospital

Sullivan said the babies were likely left at a "foundling" hospital on the grounds, where young unmarried girls would give birth. A home for unwed mothers used to be across the street from the County Grounds where Wisconsin Lutheran College is now located. Sullivan said little expense was put forth in burying the infants, and at least four were each found in a crude coffin, a pine box.

While Sullivan's crew is not yet done with their analysis of the remains, they must report back by 2002 to the State Historical Society, at which time the state will decide what to do with the remains — whether they remain a permanent collection, or will be reburied at great expense to the county.

Sullivan wants to see the collection reburied. "It is only proper," he said. "It has been our intent all along to give dignity to these people, by trying to give them a name, and find out how they lived and died. We have learned a great deal from them. To everybody else it might be data, but to someone out there, these people are family and we all need to remember that."