

**REPORT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RELOCATION OF THE GRAVE OF CHARLES  
HENRY DICKINSON (1780-1806).**



**(The Jackson-Dickinson Duel, from the Washington Post, n.d.)**

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## INTRODUCTION

During the fall of 2008 and extending into August of 2009, Dan Sumner Allen IV, staff archaeologist and President of Cumberland Research Group, Inc. conducted an archaeological reconnaissance survey of lawn at 216 Carden Avenue in Nashville, Tennessee. The purpose of the investigation was to determine the location and relocate the grave of Charles Henry Dickinson, (1780 – 1806), an early 19th century attorney and famous duelist. Reputedly an expert marksman, Dickinson's dueling career included 26 kills before it was ended at the hands of Andrew Jackson, who would later become President of the United States.

This was not the first attempt to locate the grave of Charles Dickinson. In 2006 and 2007, unsuccessful attempts to archaeologically relocate Dickinson's grave were made. These searches failed to find the grave partially due to the myriad of underground pipe and cable lines providing utilities to the residence which confounded manual probing and ground penetrating radar survey results. In 2009, Dan Sumner Allen IV, a staff archaeologist and President of Cumberland Research Group, Inc., renewed the search for the grave and began systematically examining the historical documents concerning the duel and grave location as well as the results of earlier investigations of the site.

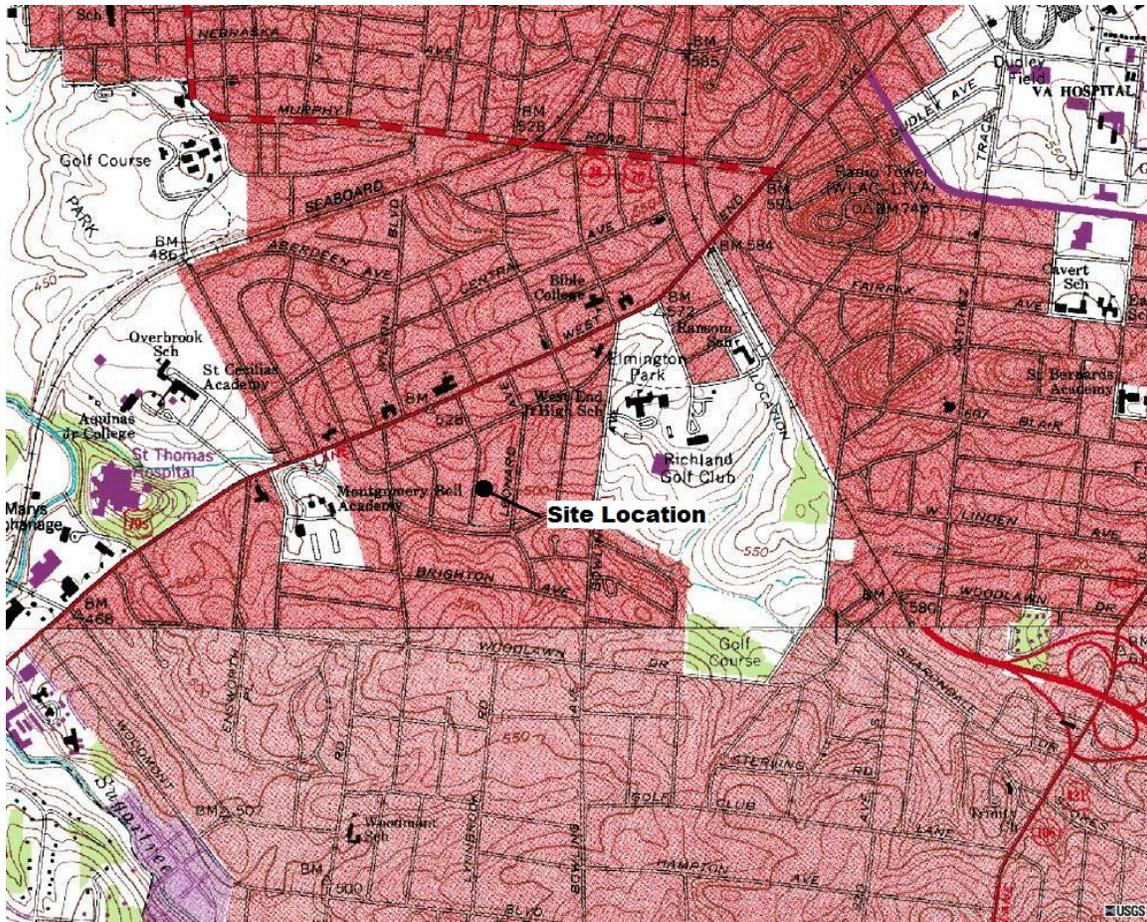


Figure 1. Charles Dickinson grave location (adapted from USGS Nashville Quadrangle map dated 1996).

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

A son of prominent families, Charles Henry Dickinson grew up in the Grove community of Caroline County, Maryland where he studied law under U.S. Chief Justice John Marshall, who wrote formal letters of introduction and recommendation for his student. Dickinson owned a house in Maryland for 13 years before moving to Tennessee, where he became a successful horse breeder and plantation owner. Within two years of his arrival in Tennessee, he courted and married the daughter of Captain Joseph Erwin.

[The History of Caroline County, Maryland, From Its Beginning](http://www.archive.org/stream/historyofcarolin00nobl/historyofcarolin00nobl_djvu.txt), (Noble, E. M., 1920:126 [http://www.archive.org/stream/historyofcarolin00nobl/historyofcarolin00nobl\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/historyofcarolin00nobl/historyofcarolin00nobl_djvu.txt)) describes the circumstances connected with the famous duel between Andrew Jackson and Charles Dickinson, a native of Caroline County, Maryland taken from several sources.

In 1806, the year of the duel, Jackson was living on a farm on the Cumberland River in Tennessee, about ten miles from Nashville. He had a passion for fine horses and it became a principal branch of his farming business, importing the best stock from Virginia and North Carolina. For the purpose of exhibiting his stock he entered his favorite horses in racing, a common practice of the day. One of Jackson's favorite horses, Truxton, was challenged to run against a horse owned by Joseph Erwin and his son-in-law, Charles Dickinson. The stakes were to be two thousand dollars on each side in cash notes with a forfeiture of eight hundred dollars. The bet was accepted and a list of notes made out. But before the running, Erwin and Dickinson chose to pay the forfeiture. Withholding the list which was in the hands of Dickinson, Erwin offered several notes but Jackson refused and demanded the list. It was produced, a selection made, and the affair satisfactorily adjusted.

Afterwards a rumor reached Dickinson that Jackson accused Erwin of producing a list of notes different from the true ones. Jackson denied the statement but Dickinson named his informant. Jackson had an altercation with that informant which ended in blows. Here the affair should have ended but there were those who desired to produce a duel between Jackson and Dickinson. Dickinson was brave and reckless, a trader in slaves and blooded horses, and reputed to be the best shot in the country. Insults were traded back and forth between the parties until Jackson was informed of the pending release of a publication and that Dickinson was about to leave the state. Demanding to see it, Jackson found that it contained allegations of cowardice and notice that Dickinson would leave for Maryland within the coming week. Jackson issued a stern challenge to Dickinson and demanded immediate satisfaction. That challenge was issued on the 23rd of May, and Dickinson's publication appeared the next morning. Jackson pressed for an instant meeting; but it was postponed at the request of the Dickinson until the 30th, at which time it was to take place at Harrison's Mills on Red River about two miles west of Adairville in Logan County, Kentucky.

During the duel, Dickinson fired first and Jackson was seen to press his hand lightly over his chest where dust flew from his clothes. Dickinson thought he had missed. Jackson slowly pulled the trigger but his pistol stopped at half cock, by the rules not considered a shot. Jackson recocked his pistol, again took deliberate aim and fired, his ball entering Dickinson's abdomen where it severed an artery and he fell. Jackson was wounded by

Dickinson's shot. On examination it was found that Dickinson's ball had buried itself in his breast and shattered two of his ribs near their articulation with his breastbone. Dickinson was taken to a nearby house where he survived but a few hours. Dickinson's supporters circulated charges of unfairness in the contest but these accusations were never proven and Dickinson never complained of unfairness before his death on May 30, 1806. His funeral took place in Nashville on June 3, 1806, and he was buried on the farm of his father-in-law, Joseph Erwin.

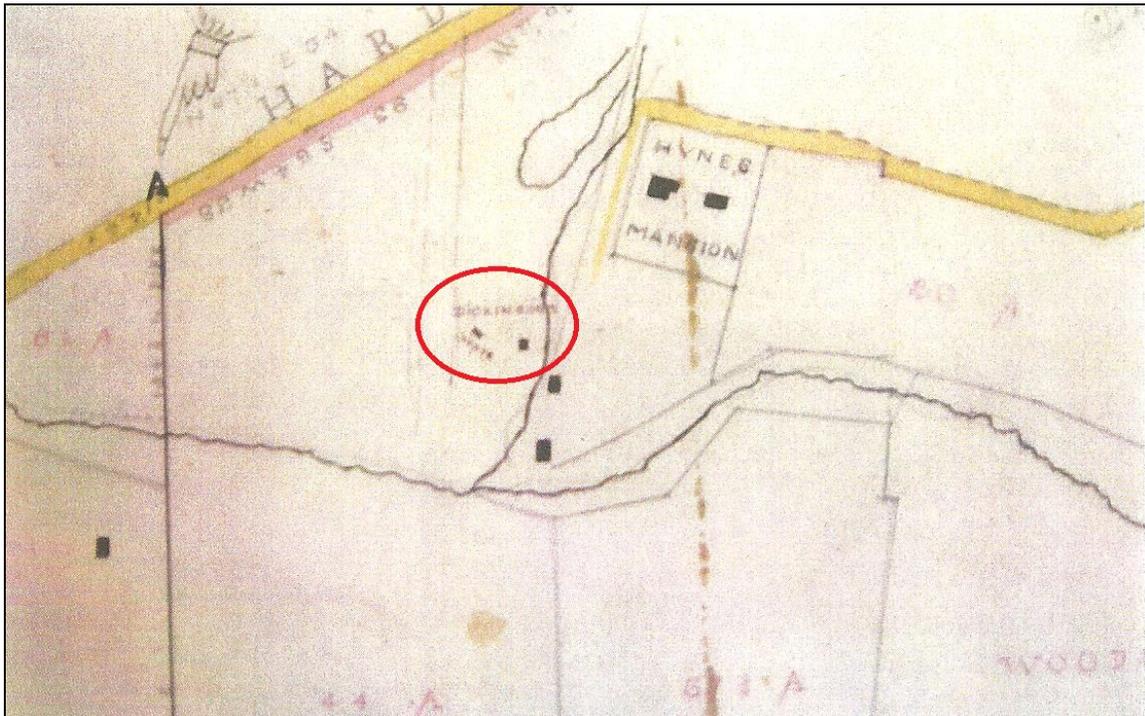


Figure 2. Plat map of the Bosley tract dated 1876 identifying the locations of the Hynes Mansion and Dickinson's grave (in red) near Harding Pike on the former farm of Joseph Erwin, "Peach Blossom".

According to the Davidson County Cemetery Survey (Inventory # NW-45 dated 3-12-2004; available at [http://davidsoncocemeterysurvey.com/Cemeteries/D-G/charles\\_dickinson\\_boxtomb.htm](http://davidsoncocemeterysurvey.com/Cemeteries/D-G/charles_dickinson_boxtomb.htm)), the Chancery Court Records of Davidson County dated November 30, 1876 contain a line drawing entitled, *Plans of Charles Bosley Tract* which show the Harding Turnpike (now West End Avenue) with side roads, houses, springs, mounds and graves. Under the drawing is written: "The above plan correctly represents a Survey of the cultivated Fields of the Chas. Bosley Tract now the property of Gertrude B. Bowling, as done under the order N. Baxter, C & M. W. W. Southgate, DSDC." Near the house identified as the Hynes Mansion is an identified grave site marked "Dickinson's grave" (Figure 2).

In the 1911 publication of Historical and Beautiful Homes In and Near Nashville, by Mrs. James. E. Caldwell, a photograph of the box tomb of Charles Dickinson was identified (Figure 3). According to family records, there was only one grave, that of Charles Dickinson, in the cemetery. Charles Dickinson's box or false tomb was lost in the 1920s when it was reported as struck by a bulldozer during development of the surrounding

area as a residential neighborhood. Further historical research by Fletch Coke refutes this story and more accurately suggests that the Dickinson box tomb was reported stolen in 1926 and a reward for its return offered by the State of Tennessee [*The Review Appeal* (Williamson Co., TN.); February 18, 1926]. The gravemarker was never recovered.

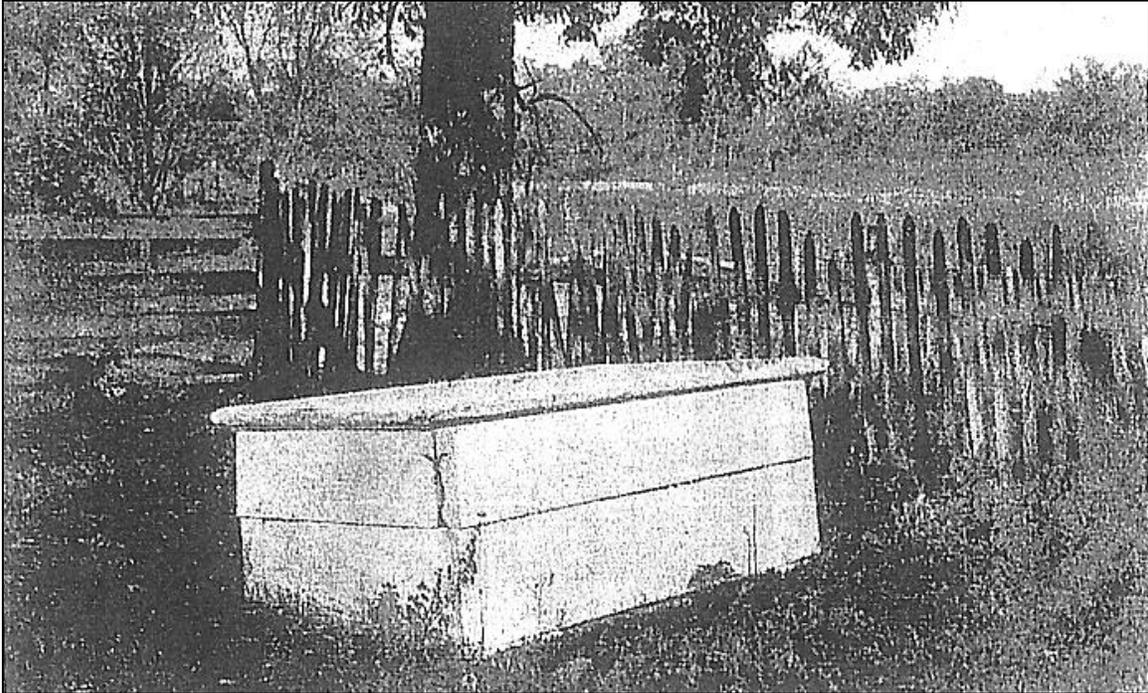


Figure 3. Box tomb of Charles Dickinson included in a description of the Whitworth Place, part of the Bosley estate, previously part of the Erwin plantation dated 1911.

From information in the Nashville Banner, dated May 28, 1966, Wirt Armstead Cate, a Nashville historical writer was quoted as saying “for as long as Nashvillians can remember, a spot on what was once the old Capt. Joseph Erwin’s plantation was pointed out as Dickinson’s burial place. A box tomb once stood there but was removed in 1923, when the plantation was subdivided for residential development and a bulldozer struck the edge of the tomb.”

In the 1920s, the Secretary of the Tennessee Historical Society furnished the following statement in regards to the grave of Mr. Dickinson:

*“In regard to his (Charles Dickinson) latter end will say that his remains were buried on the farm of his father-in-law, Mr. Joseph Erwin, then some distance west of Nashville. But the city has so grown in the last fifty years that the grave is now within the bounds of the western district of the city. Until a few years ago it was marked by an old fashioned box tomb, although it had no inscription whatever. Since the farm has become a part of the city, this tomb has been removed and there is no mark of the grave except that we know exactly its position and are trying to have it permanently marked.*

*In regard to Mr. Dickinson will say that it is now generally admitted that the difficulty with General Jackson grew out of the sporting life of both of them and is attributed largely to differences growing out of a horse race. I think the verdict of history is that Mr. Dickinson was a young man of promising abilities, but in keeping with the life of the day*

was high strung, impetuous, and probably imprudent. There is nothing, however, justified with reference to immoral character, no more than was characteristic of life in the South at that time."

In 1966, the local historical society of Caroline County, Maryland announced the discovery of a burial site they assumed to be the grave containing a metal casket of Charles Dickinson citing an oral tradition that Dickinson had been secretly exhumed by a family servant and relocated to his birthplace in Maryland. The coffin and remains were sent to the Smithsonian Institution for forensic examination before reburial. Again in 2005, the Caroline County Historical Society claimed to have the remains. Nick Fielder, then State Archaeologist for Tennessee requested a copy of the original 1966 forensic examination which indicated that the remains buried in Maryland were most probably female.



Figure 4. Bransford Realty Company plan map of Whitland Subdivision dated 1927 (Lot No. 36 in red, note faint "X" near the southwestern corner of the lot).

In 1924, Bransford Realty Company began developing the land surrounding Peach Blossom mansion into the historic Whitland residential subdivision of lots on newly planned streets including Carden, Wilson, and Leonard Avenues. On Carden Avenue, Lot No. 36, now street address 216 Carden Avenue, there is a faintly drawn "X" on the original plan, identifying the lot as the location of Dickinson's grave (Figure 4). Sale of that lot in 1934 to Pearl A. Southall (Davidson Co. Deed Book 107; page 950) in part, states that a restriction or easement exists for a *graveyard known as the Dickinson burying place with the right of ingress and egress*. In 1963, the Southalls sold Lot No. 36 to the L. F. Braswell family (Davidson Co. Deed Book 107; page 533) whose deed also contained a similar restriction. Again in 2004, Lot No. 36 was sold, this time to Century Home Builders, LLC by the Braswells grandson, Walter Gowen Elliot Jr. but no mention of the cemetery is contained within that deed.

In 2006, When Jim and Laura Bowen bought their home at 216 Carden Avenue, they knew it was located in the historic Whitland subdivision. What they didn't know is that in their front yard lay not only a 200 year old grave, but also the remains of a prehistoric Native-American occupation dating between about 1250 and 1450 A.D. Local historians Fletch Coke and Paul Clements conducted historical research for years to solve the mystery of where Charles Dickinson was buried. Historians in Caroline County, Maryland, where Dickinson was born, claimed that years after Dickinson's burial a loyal servant came to Tennessee, secretly dug up the remains of his former master, and returned with them to Maryland, where the remains were reburied.

## **RESULTS OF THE INVESTIGATION**

This was not the first attempt to locate the grave of Charles Dickinson. In 2006 and 2007, unsuccessful attempts to archaeologically relocate Dickinson's grave were made but failed to relocate the grave due to the myriad of underground utility lines to the residence which confounded manual probing and ground penetrating radar survey results. In 2009, Dan Sumner Allen IV, a staff archaeologist and President of Cumberland Research Group, Inc., renewed the search for the grave and began systematically examining the historical documents concerning the duel and grave location as well as the results of earlier investigations of the site.

The primary objective of the 2009 archaeological survey was to locate any subsurface disturbances in the lawn of 216 Carden Avenue (Lot No. 36) that would be of the size typically associated with a graveshaft, the actual excavation dug into the earth to receive an inhumation. For an adult the excavated grave should typically measure between five and seven feet in length and two to three feet wide. The survey was based upon systematic pedestrian survey of the entire tract, systematic survey of the tract with ground-penetrating radar, and systematic probing of the tract with a 5 foot long, ball-swaged tile probe.

As a result of the survey, several utility lines were encountered including underground cable lines, natural gas lines generally paralleling the southern boundary of the tract and water lines generally paralleling the southern edge of the driveway near the northern border of the tract. No other obvious subsurface disturbance were observed during surface examination, ground penetrating radar survey, or probing of the site.

Knowing that the 1927 Bransford Realty Map of the Whitland subdivision shows an 'X' on top of the Carden Avenue lot and that references in the deeds to the lot state that it contained a burial ground, a different approach was used in effort to find evidence of the grave location. Setting aside all the previous data from ground-penetrating radar attempts and following intuition, attention was directed at two mature tree locations located within the lawn including one tree actually located near the spot marked with an "X" on the 1927 map. During the winter of 2008-2009, this tree had broken during a storm and was subsequently removed, leaving a large stump in its place and a root ball measuring approximately six feet in diameter below the surface. Excavations against the eastern edge of the root ball revealed a rectangular edge of a feature protruding from under the root ball and further examination of this feature yielded five wrought nails within the feature fill at a depth of ca. 3 feet below the prehistoric deposits. As a result of the presence of these nails, the stump was partially removed by stump grinder and it, along with its root ball excavated by hand shoveling and chain saws.

As a result of removal of the stump and root ball, a single grave location was documented in the southwestern portion of the lawn at 216 Carden Avenue (Figure 5 thru 8). The suspected grave was arranged in the typical Judeo-Christian burial pattern of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, head to the west and foot to the east, reflecting belief in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (King James Version) which states; *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.* To Christians the statement, "the dead in Christ will rise first" applies to a sequence of events at the return of Christ to the Holy Land; namely, that the resurrection of their bodies -- those who have died as believers in Christ -- will immediately precede the rapture of those living who belong to Christ. To Christians this union of resurrected and glorified bodies and spirits will be for eternity.

The burial was located directly under the stump of a mature ( $\pm$  40 year old) tree located in the southwestern portion of the front lawn at 216 Carden Avenue. The primary burial deposit was encountered at five feet, two inches below the surface and extended to six feet, one inch below the present surface. Stratigraphically, the burial deposit was located at the base of a grave shaft which extended from a buried surface overlain by 30 inches of grade fill associated with leveling of the lawn during construction of the neighborhood in the 1920s and 30s. This fill contained construction related and domestic artifacts associated with the 1930s Southall residence. Immediately below the grade fill and extending to a depth of 32 inches below the buried surface was a rectangular grave shaft which contained a moderate density of lithic debitage and fragmented shell-tempered prehistoric ceramics.

The grave shaft was rectangular in shape and measured seven feet long by three feet wide. At its base, the primary burial deposit was hexagonal in shape, a form traditionally known as a "toe pincher" style of coffin. All the wooden planking associated with the coffin had disintegrated leaving a dark hexagonal organically enriched stain and deposit measuring six feet, six inches in length by twenty four inches wide at the shoulder. The burial deposit measured eleven inches in thickness and was homogenous, organically enriched, dark brown silty loam (Munsell; 10YR 3/4) in texture and color as opposed to the yellowish brown (Munsell; 10YR 5/6) color of the surrounding undisturbed clayey subsoil. The disintegrated head and foot planks of the coffin measured fourteen inches wide. During the excavation no evidence was observed of previous disturbance with the exception of bioturbation resulting from the root system of the mature tree. One large tree root intruded into the head of the grave and a large, roughly dressed, limestone

cobble was intrusive to the grave shaft but did not reach the depth of the coffin deposit. The cobble was probably pushed into the graveshaft by the overlying root system of the tree as it matured. The coffin nails were located where they would have been as if the wooden coffin deteriorated in place.

As evident by the presence of coffin hardware artifacts, the coffin was constructed of wooden planks held by wrought nails (n=27; Figure 7). The nails were hand headed and hand tipped by hammer in spade fashion on an anvil. The nails were clustered at the corners and interspersed along the sides and end walls at the head, foot, and shoulder of the coffin deposit. The top and bottom of the coffin were also probably made of wood planks and secured with wrought nails and/or hand threaded wood screws, one of which was recovered near the center of the head (western) end of the deposit. With the exception of the wrought nails and single screw, no other coffin hardware or personal artifacts were recovered.

Skeletal material within the deposit was limited to a single phalange (finger tip) recovered from the upper, medial portion of the deposit. This is not uncommon in graves of the period due to many variables including the hydrology of the area of the grave, the lack of embalming, and the acidity of the soil containing the burial. Regionally, other graves from the 1800 to 1810 period have rarely contained well preserved skeletal remains. Because of the lack of skeletal preservation, samples of the burial matrix were sent to the University of Tennessee soil lab at Ellington Agricultural Center in Nashville for testing. The results of that testing indicated the matrix had a slightly acidic water pH of 6.5, very high levels of phosphorous (857 lbs. per acre), high levels of potassium (218 lbs. per acre), calcium (10770 lbs. per acre), and magnesium (184 lbs. per acre).

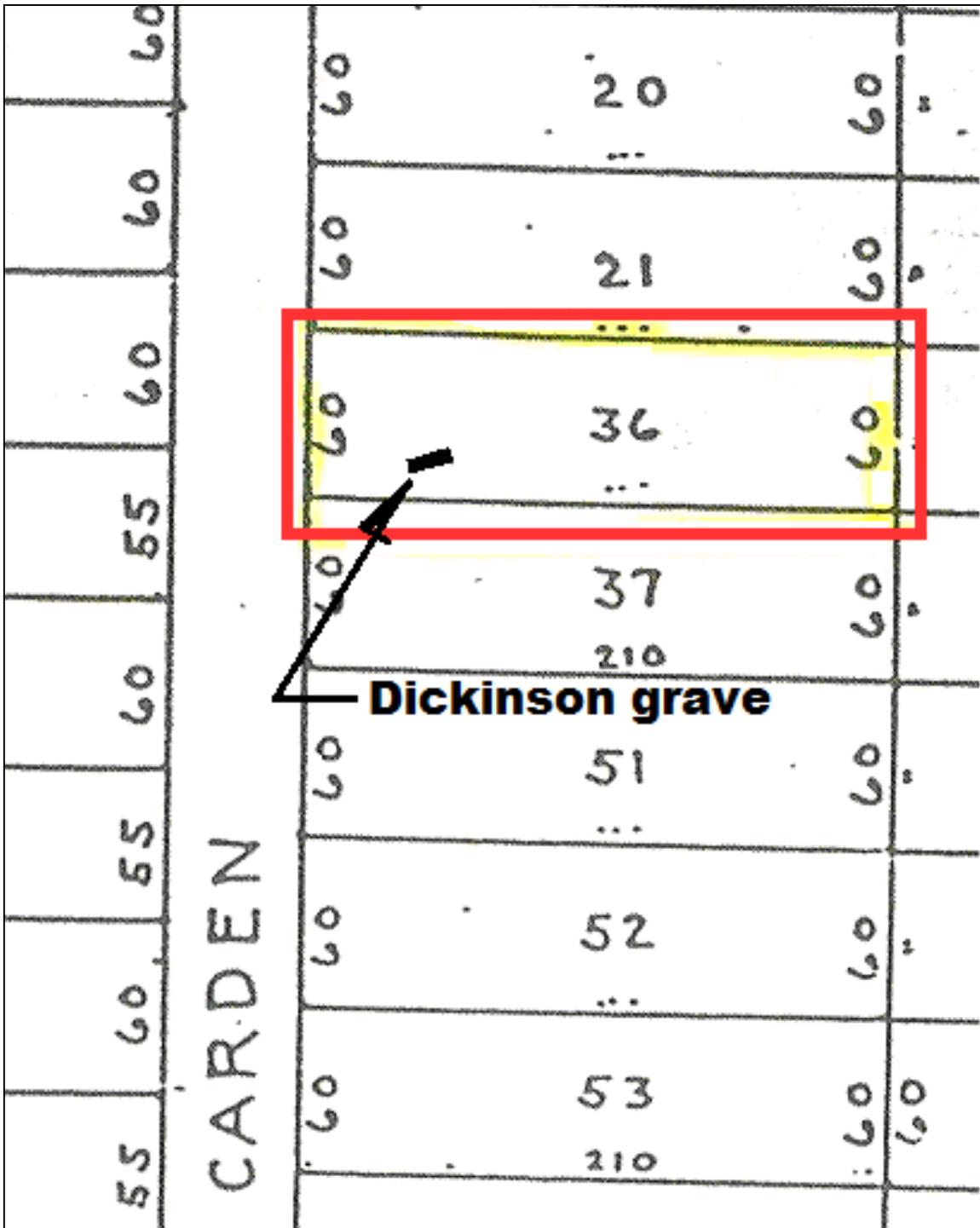


Figure 5. Charles Dickinson grave location adapted from Bransford Realty Company plan map of Whitland Subdivision dated 1927. (Lot No. 36 in red).

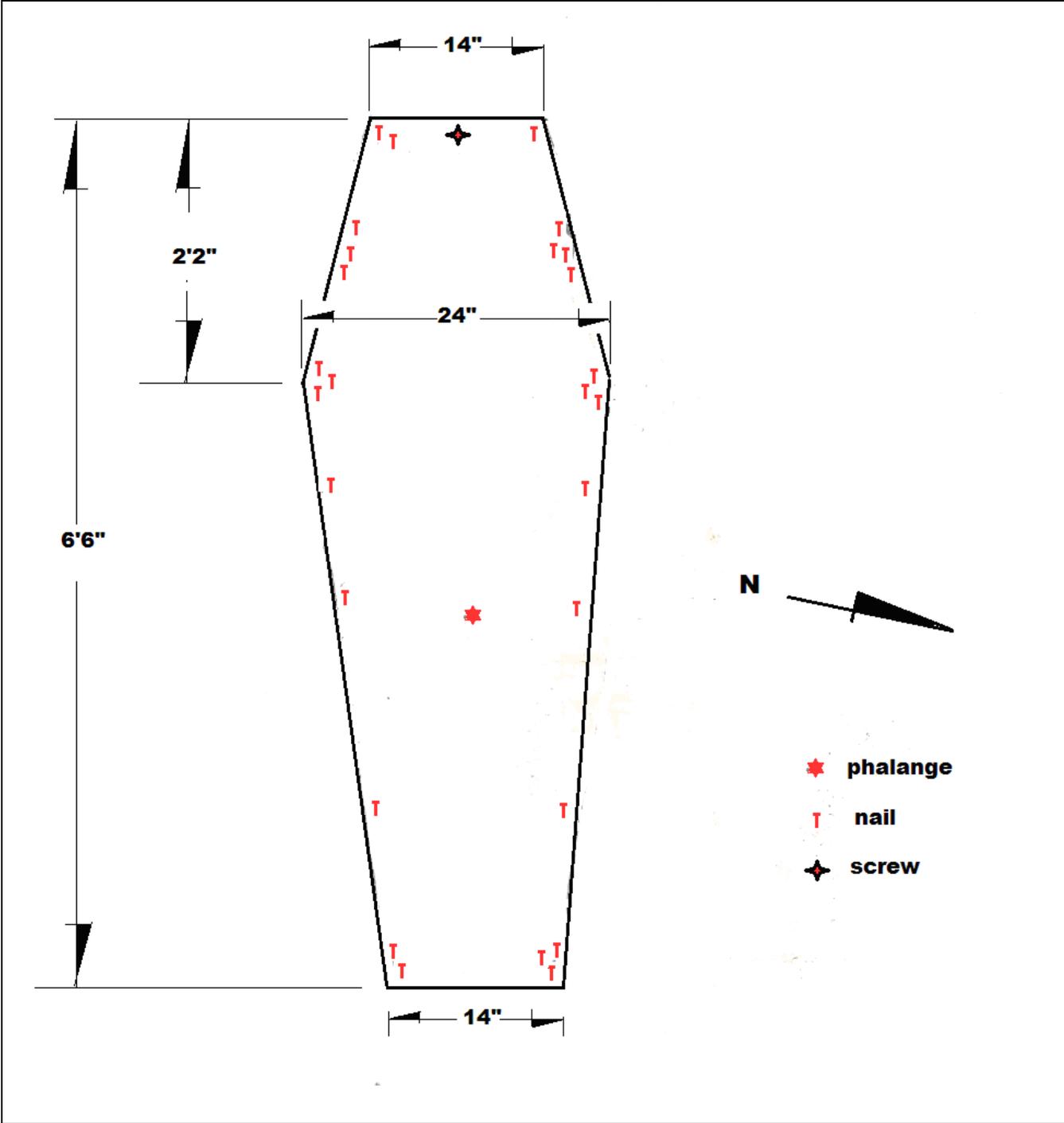


Figure 6. Charles Dickinson; plan view of burial deposit.



Figure 7. Charles Dickinson Grave; rectangular grave shaft (view west).



Figure 8. Charles Dickinson Grave; hexagonal primary burial deposit partially excavated (view to west).



Figure 9. Charles Dickinson Grave; hexagonal primary burial deposit fully excavated (view to west).



Figure 10. Charles Dickinson Grave; phalange (finger tip).



Figure 11. Charles Dickinson Grave; coffin hardware, early 19<sup>th</sup> century (ca.1800-1820) hand-headed and spade pointed wrought nails and hand-threaded screw (right).



Figure 12. Charles Dickinson Grave; prehistoric Mississippian Period pottery recovered from grave shaft.