

Nathaniel Russell House

Historic Landscape Treatment and Site Recommendations

Tunnell and Tunnell Landscape Architecture

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Executive Summary

The Historic Charleston Foundation is seeking to restore the front entry area of the Nathaniel Russell House as a first phase of a more comprehensive landscape restoration. The period of interpretation of the house is set at c. 1802, contemporaneous with the construction of the house. The Foundation would like to restore the landscape to similar time period.

Restoration is a word with many connotations. The intentions of such an enterprise are well meaning. Restoration as a technical term has acquired more specific meanings when viewed in the context of the Secretary of the Interiors Standards for the treatment of Cultural Landscapes. For a property of such history and importance, the same level of rigor should be applied to the landscape as to the house itself and though many years of archeological historic landscape research and archival study have passed, the standard of treatment for the front entry area for the Nathaniel Russell House should be an historic rehabilitation that maintains important later features in the landscape while interpreting the evolution of the site overtime.

Archeological and documentary evidence supports the existence of various site features that differ from the existing features present. Colonial Revival features in the site have attained an historic value and integrity of their own. This evolution over time should be respected and elements of that landscape should be repaired where broken and where those elements pose a potential liability to the public and the stewards of the property.

Interpretation of the landscape should reflect its importance to the Colonial Revival and the value of authenticity. This is an historic rehabilitation of a Cultural Landscape where various non-original elements are left as a reflection of the rich history of the site and because enough information doesn't exist for an authentic and accurate restoration to the period of interpretation for the house. Fence and gate designs would be wholly conjectural and the front walk, rendered in the original crushed shell material, would lead to the deterioration of the house interior. Planting forms and locations can be made but exact species determination cannot be made without more evaluation.

The recreation of an authentic landscape reflecting the period of interpretation of c. 1810-1820 is not possible and if attempted would be the recreation of a conjectural landscape. While forms could be placed in space where they once existed, the finishes and designs could not be authenticated and work of lasting significance and integrity would be destroyed. This would not be consistent with preservation best practices and would create of landscape less rich and less communicative of the lasting contributions of generations of Russell house owners and inhabitants.

Purpose and Background

The purpose of this report has been to review the research material prepared to date and to make a recommendation for treatment of this historic landscape.

A rigorous archeological investigation has occurred in the front garden area of the Nathaniel Russell House during the past 12 years. These investigations have recovered many artifacts and valuable pieces of evidence pertaining to the history of the site over the past 200 years. Layers of debris and evidence of changing patterns of use have been recovered.

As further research and site investigation is anticipated as well as further work on the garden, what is critical is to incorporate this information into an intellectually consistent framework that has integrity and authenticity and produces a coherent approach to the work on the landscape, its interpretation and its presentation to the public.

The desired period of interpretation for the landscape has been established as the early 19th century, congruent with the period of interpretation for the house itself, and contemporaneous with the lives of the builder and his wife. Presenting an authentic recreation of the landscape circa 1810 is an ambitious goal. All too often as the reach into the past is extended, the reach into conjecture increases. This is a pitfall to avoid.

A further problem looms in the not too distant future. How will the remainder of the site be treated and interpreted? To what extent did the 1981 work by Rudy Favretti disturb or destroy original fabric? Is it justifiable to attempt to apply differing standards for historic treatment to different sections of a property?

After careful and thoughtful reflection on the material provided through on site investigation and research and in light of administrative and institutional issues, I believe that the most appropriate treatment option for the entry area of the Nathaniel Russell House landscape is one of Historic Rehabilitation.

The terminologies used in preservation circles have been clarified by the Secretary of the Interior and are useful to review.

Treatment Strategies

The Secretary of the Interior's standards for historic landscapes recognize four distinct treatment strategies that require differing levels of rigor in order to be successful. These standards are paraphrased below:

Preservation—Preservation assumes historical uses of the property are maintained or adapted appropriately and original features stabilized.

Russell Landscape Assessment: Continual change in use and ownership has characterized this historic landscape over time. Significant Colonial Revival landscape features exist that are worthy of preservation in their own right. A continual appreciation of preservation needs to be applied to the site with the recognition that history did not stop after the original owners moved from the house. This attitude alone is not sufficient though it can become a guiding principle.

Rehabilitation—The historic character of the property is retained and preserved and the removal of distinctive materials, spaces and spatial relationships will be avoided. Changes that have occurred to the property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained. Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence. New additions or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features and spatial relationships that characterize the property. New work will be differentiated from the old but remain compatible with the historic materials.

Russell Landscape Assessment: In light of needs of the visiting public and the Historic Charleston Foundation, certain elements that vary from the original landscape are worth retaining, preserving, interpreting and, indeed, celebrating. The changes from private residence, to convent, back to private residence and finally to historic house museum have each generated certain changes to the site and though the term “restoration” carries a caché that some may feel “rehabilitation” lacks, what is more important than a title is to chose a treatment option that will yield a landscape with the greatest consistency, integrity and authenticity.

Restoration—Materials and features from the restoration period will be retained and preserved. Removal of materials and features that characterize the period will not be permitted. Materials and features that characterize other historical periods will be documented prior to removal. Deteriorated features from the restoration period will be repaired rather than replaced. The creation of a false sense of history will be avoided by refusing to add conjectural features, features from other properties, or by combining features that never existed simultaneously.

Assessment: This is a high standard to achieve and one that is not possible given the institutional context, program of uses, as well as the evidence at hand to date.

Reconstruction—This treatment is recommended for vanished or destroyed portions of an historic landscape when documentary and physical evidence is available to permit accurate reconstruction with minimal conjecture, and such reconstruction is essential to the public understanding of the property. A reconstruction is based on the accurate duplication of historic features substantiated by documentary or physical evidence rather than on conjectural designs. A reconstruction should not build a landscape that never actually existed.

Assessment: For many of the reasons listed under “Restoration”, reconstruction is also not an appropriate treatment option.

Recommendation for Landscape Treatment

The historic landscape of the Nathaniel Russell House should be treated in a manner consistent with an historic rehabilitation. The period of interpretation desired is early 19th century. This is the period of interpretation of the house museum itself and is considered the most important period for the house. Too much of the original fabric of the historic landscape has been destroyed, modified, or deteriorated to be considered a restoration at this point. Too many of the original materials used in the landscape are still unknown or conjectural. A reconstruction requires more rigor.

The following is a step-by-step analysis of critical areas of the historic landscape at the Nathaniel Russell house, what is known about each area and what is not known. The degree of conjecture involved in either a restoration or reconstruction would prove intellectually flawed and insupportable. Furthermore, important elements of the landscape would be necessarily destroyed in support of the creation of a historic landscape that never existed.

Paths and Walks

The front path was originally crushed shell. If restored to the original material, the crushed shell would be carried into the house on the shoes of visitors and would produce a continual problem for administrators of the house museum. A hard surface not in place during the period of interpretation is recommended for the front walk. It would be unwise to restore the original walk.

A north-south path once connected the service drive to the front walk. This was also crushed shell. At one time, a brick edge was added. Other evidence suggests that the grade has been raised through accretion by as much as four inches.

At the front steps, other evidence points to a grade that was raised as an expedient decision rather than a deliberative action for it was far easier to add bluestone to an existing compacted grade than to excavate and place bluestone so that the risers at the front door would maintain a consistent height. Risers of inconsistent height are dangerous and this condition should be corrected.

Recommendation: Maintain brick edge at current elevation and lower bluestone path to provide a bottom riser of a height consistent with remaining risers in the front stair. Maintain the existing width and stone pattern. Provide a shell path to make connections to the service drive and garden to the south in the arcing form discovered in the archeological investigation.

Fences

The existing Colonial Revival iron fence, knee wall, gates and piers date from the Pelzer era c. 1928 and have attained an historic presence and importance of their own. The fence features have been a part of the Russell house image for 4 generations and though not accurate to the period of the construction of the house, are an excellent example of design and workmanship present during the Colonial Revival. The gate and fence have inspired designers and restorers for 4 generations and to remove them as non-historic and replace them with a conjectural fence with no concrete documentary evidence would be a terrible mistake and a great loss.

While the physical evidence exists to show that previous fences were in this location, no depictions of these fences prior to 1890± have been found. Any fence proposed would be inauthentic conjecture and support a fictive history.

Recommendation: Retain and celebrate and interpret the quite wonderful Colonial Revival fence, gates and piers.

Plant Material

While plant material locations are clear from archeological evidence, the exact plants used are not. The palette of historic plants available is known for the period of interpretation, no specific references to exact locations of specific plants have been discovered. While letters and notes wax poetic about the foliar lushness of the Russell garden, no contemporary visitor has left notes or diary entries that depict the locations of these plants. Any planting plan that claims to restore this landscape at this point would be conjectural. The phyto-analysis mentioned in the Archeology report is recommended.

Plant material selected should be made with as solid evidence as possible. As long as the presentation to the public is clearly indicated that the plant material is consistent with plant varieties available to the Federal period residence of Charleston and the low country, this can be workable. Selecting plant species and heirloom plants of the period can be useful and educational on several levels.

A substantial area for question is the degree to which the front garden was covered in turf grass and, if so, what variety? The carpet type lawn popular today was not possible until well after the invention of the lawn mower. During the period of interpretation, any lawn grasses at all would have been cut by scythe.

The Magnolia

The large magnolia near the left corner of the house is not original and post-dates the colonial revival period of the house itself. This tree should be dated and if not from a period contemporary with the construction of the bluestone walk and fence, it should be removed.

Questions for Further Research and Investigation

Additional work should certainly be performed on the site to evaluate other areas to determine whether this treatment option of rehabilitation can be applied. Restoration as a technique is out of the question as too much original fabric of the early gardens was destroyed. If sufficient information and energy exists for a reconstruction on other parts of the site, this could be performed once this additional information has been gathered.

Two choices then appear: 1) use rehabilitation as the standard of treatment, or 2) use a different period of interpretation for the historic landscape.

Research to discover if a fence existed along the drive itself during the period of interpretation is also of enormous importance. This edge condition may have been so disturbed by planting operations over the years that no good evidence is available yet this is an area where additional work is recommended.

As work proceeds on this important historic landscape, a wish list begins to emerge. Beyond the other areas for further research, a topographic survey of the site at a minimum scale of 1"=10' is strongly recommended if one does not yet exist. This will be a vital document as plans that compare various periods in the evolution of this historic landscape are completed.

Driveway and Connections to Other Areas of the Garden

Though likely outside the scope of the project itself, the driveway is a character defining element of the historic landscape and should be carefully considered and not passed over as merely utilitarian. It speaks loudly for how the household of Nathaniel Russell lived on a daily basis. What was the original material? What was the original elevation? As has been demonstrated in other areas of the landscape, elevations typically increase due to accretion. In the driveway area, this may have been offset to a certain extent by compaction from vehicular traffic. At any rate, this should be a profitable area for at least a shovel test, if not another test unit itself.

Appendix I
Annotated Plans Illustrating Evolution of Site

Evolution of the Site

Appendix 1 shows five annotated plans that summarize the findings of the archeological team's research over the past 12 years. A comparison of these periods in this area's development shows the evolution of the site and, to a certain degree, the evolution of thought of each owner. Areas that are dashed are those areas where enough hard evidence has not been presented to determine exactly where a feature should be located; rather it suggests a likely location for a feature based on the evidence at hand at this date.

Annotated Plans Illustrating Evolution of Site

Fig. 1 Early 19th Century

1. Main path material shell
2. Main path width and geometry conjectural only from evidence available
3. Path elevation from stratigraphy below current pavement surface
4. Width of gate opening at sidewalk conjectural
5. Exact edge of driveway is conjectural 12" to 24" from n. face of house
6. Edge of shell path from drive to steps known from excavations
7. width of shell path from drive to house known
8. Some planting locations shown from plant stains

Fig. 2 Mid 19th Century

- 1.-8. same as above
9. (Evidenced by features 80-83 and 100-102. Features 7 and 8 inconclusive)*
10. Convenience path retained near house toward south

Fig. 3 Post Photograph

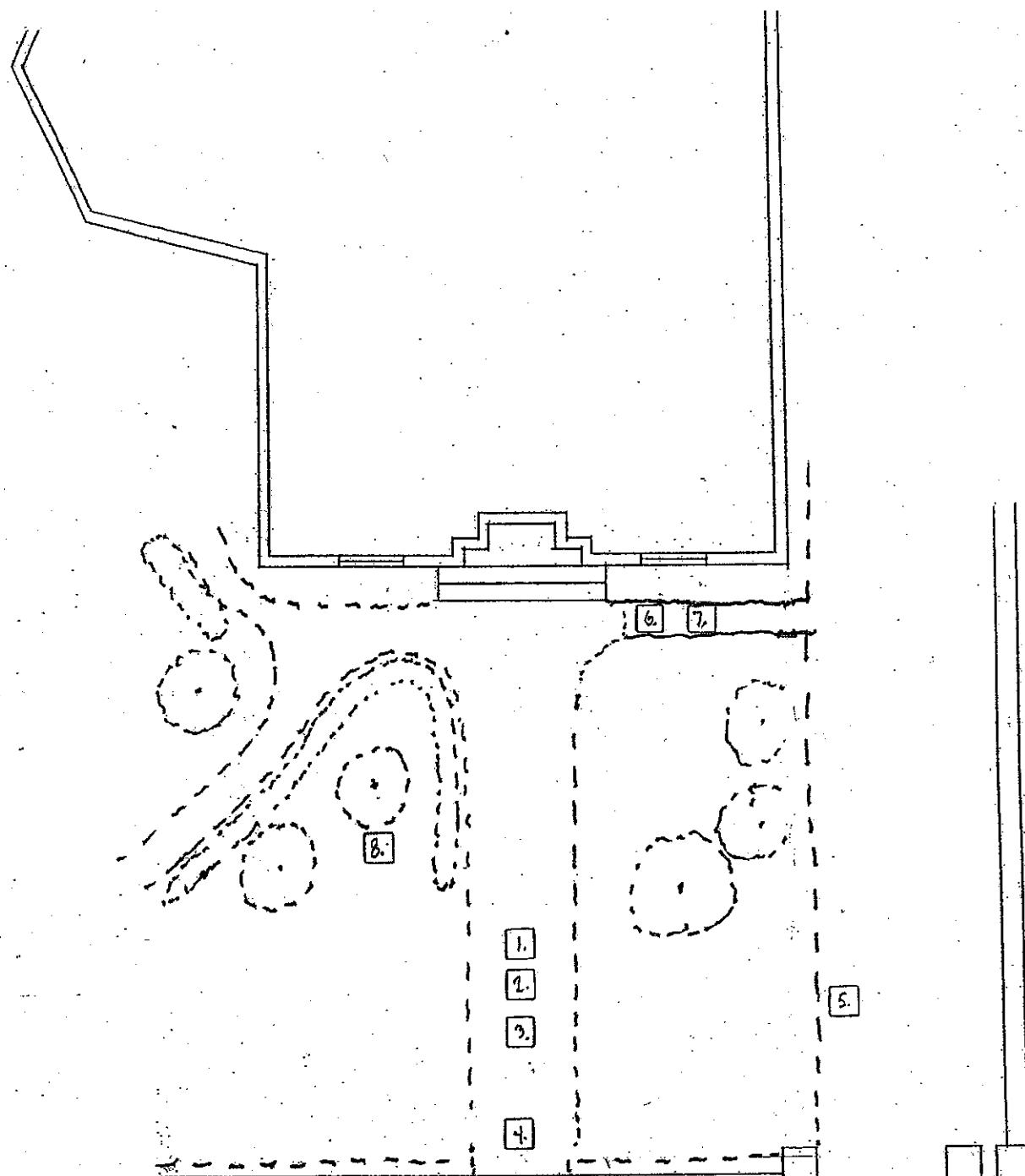
- 1.-8. same as above
9. Arcing path appears plain as day. Electric or telegraph wires suggests date is post 1875 at least*
10. Convenience path retained near house toward south

Fig. 4 Late 19th to Early 20th Century

- 1.-8. same as above
9. Arcing path from front door toward Meeting St. disappears from stratigraphy (Evidenced by features 80-83 and 100-102. Features 7 and 8 inconclusive)*
10. Convenience path retained near house toward south

Fig. 5 Existing Conditions

* How to account for this seemingly anomalous disappearance and reappearance of this feature? The appearance of features 80-83 and 100-102 may be later than suggested by stratigraphy or photograph is earlier than previously supposed. It is more likely that the arcing path was lost to time and abandoned than that it disappeared and was "restored" during the 19th century and disappeared again.



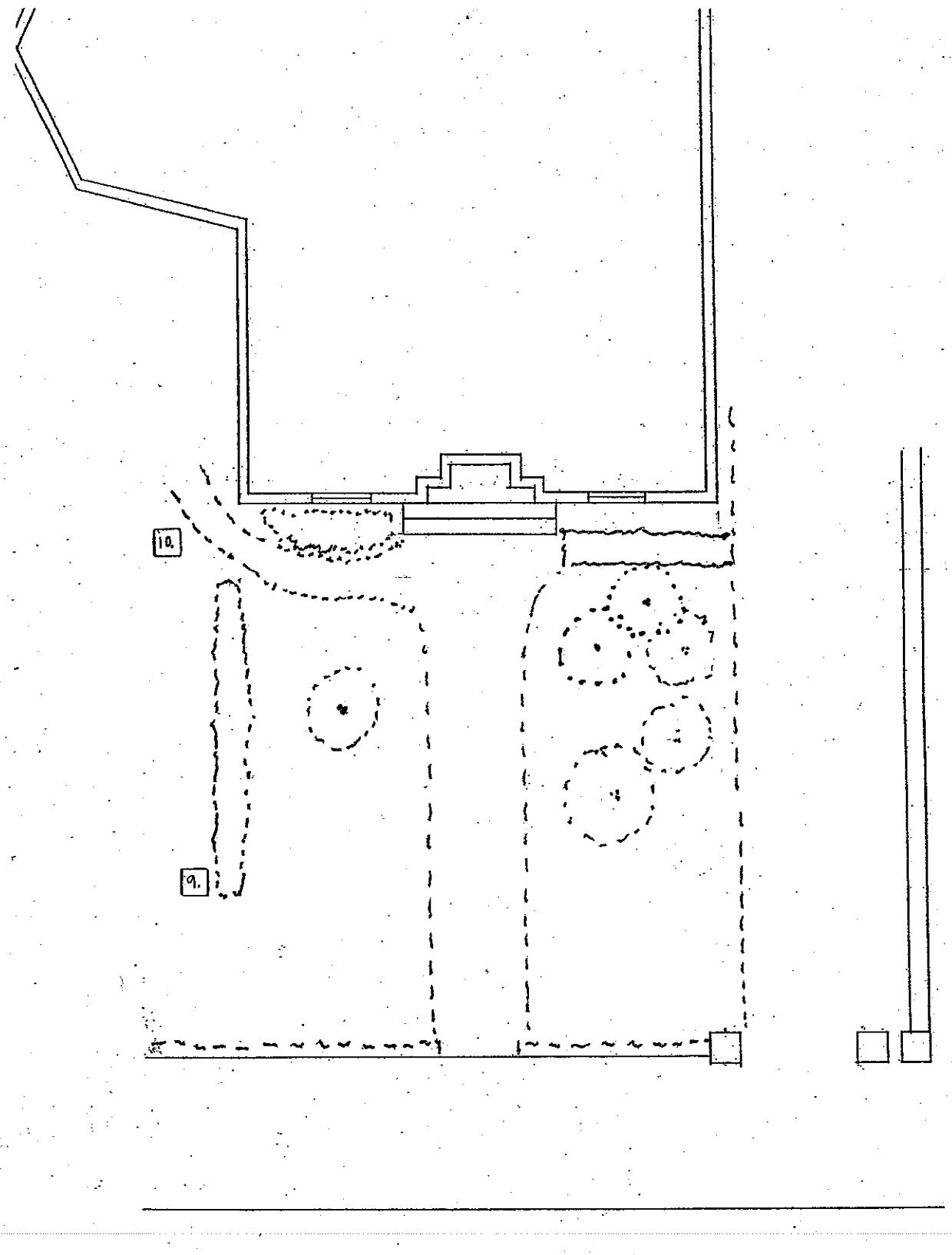
1" = 10'

FIG. 1

Tunnell & Tunnell Landscape Architecture

EARLY 19th CENTURY

Final Report



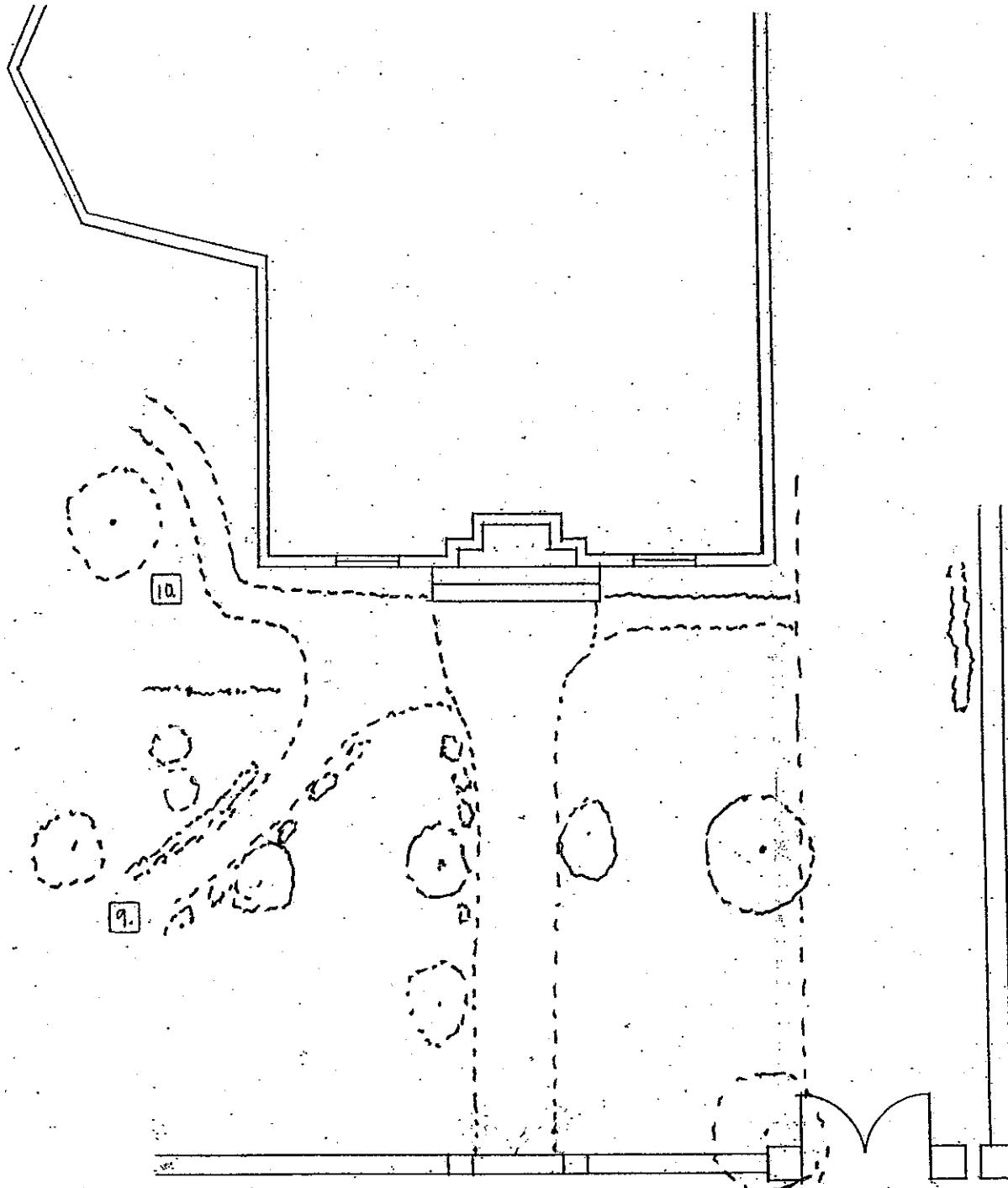
1" = 10'

FIG. 2

Tunnell & Tunnell Landscape Architecture

MID 19TH CENTURY

Final Report



10'

FIG. 3

Tunnell & Tunnell Landscape Architecture

POST-PHOTOGRAPH DATE

Final Report

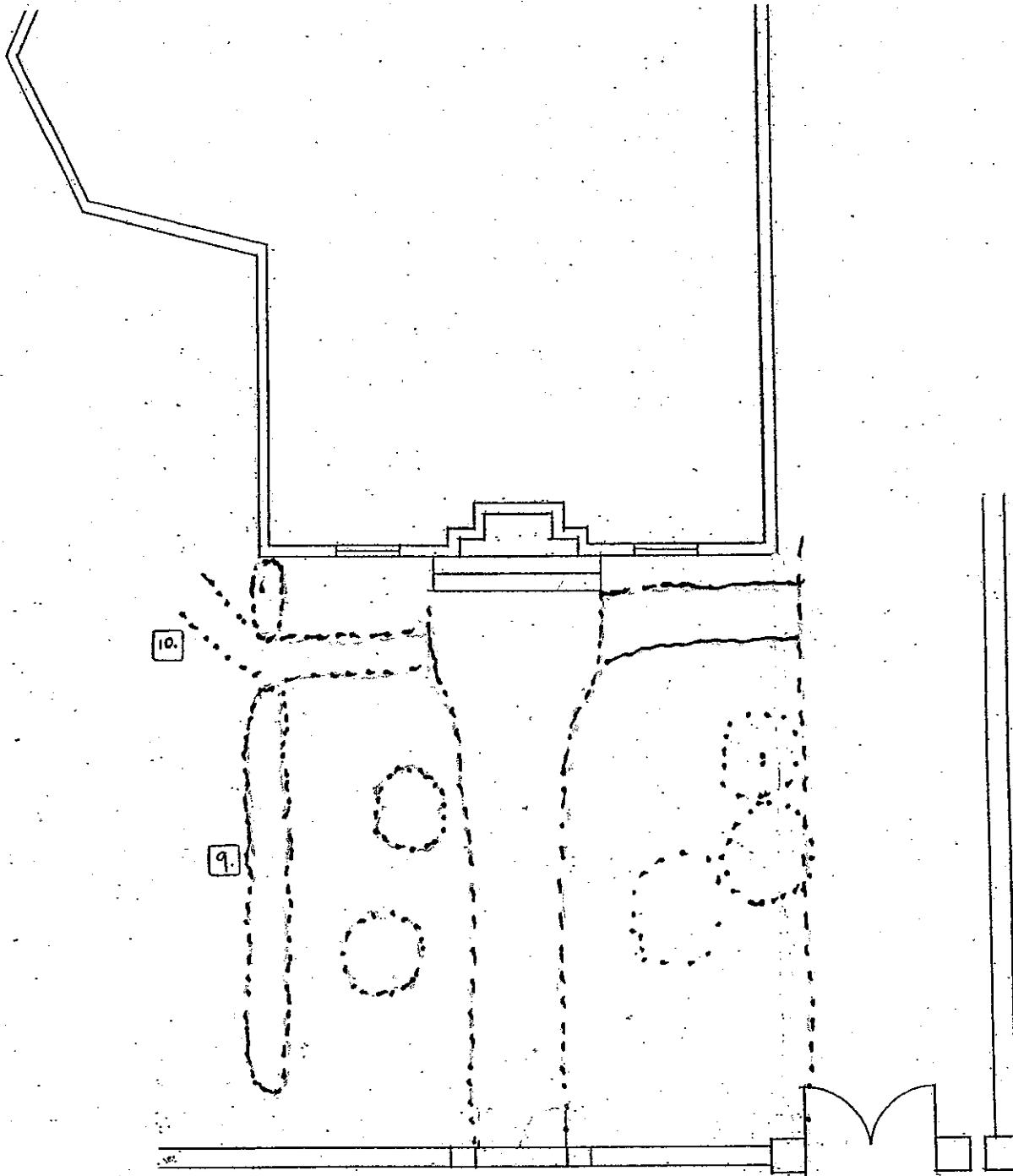


FIG. 4

Tunnell & Tunnell Landscape Architecture

MID TO LATE 19TH CENTURY

Final Report

1" = 10'

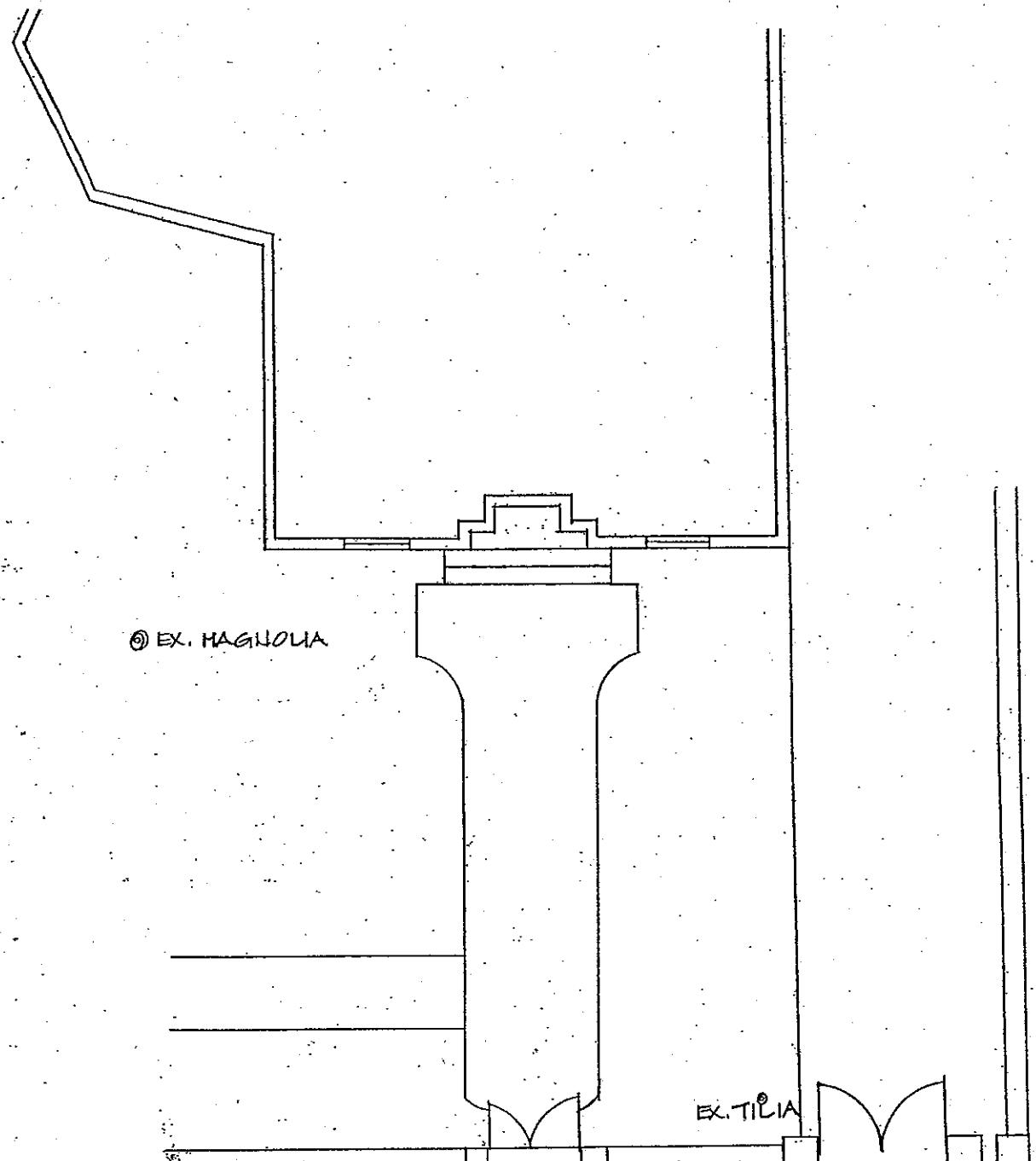


FIG. 5

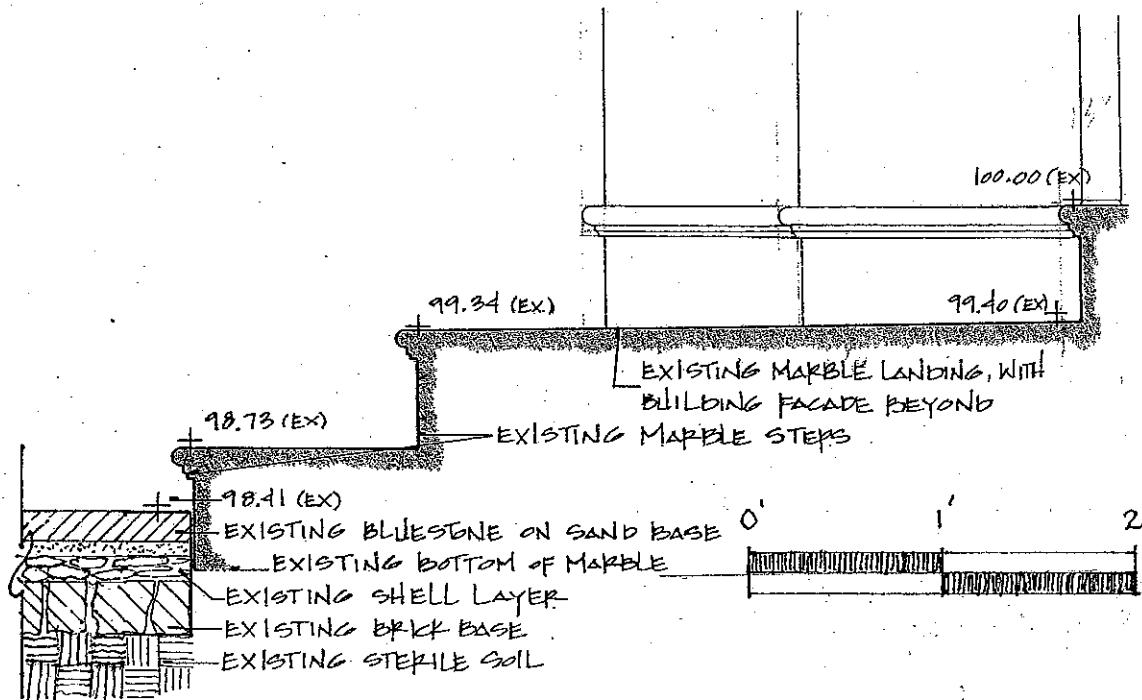
Tunnell & Tunnell Landscape Architecture

EXISTING - 2001

Final Report

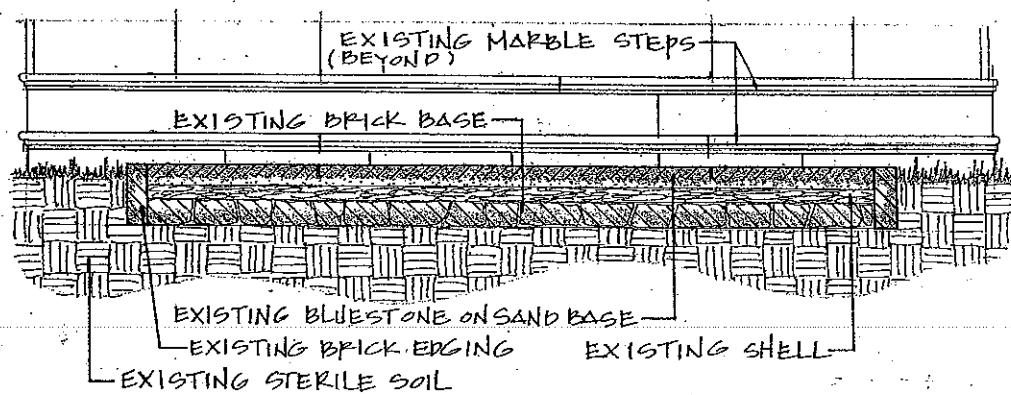
Appendix II

Existing Conditions of Front Walk and Stair



Existing Colonial Revival Work (c.1928)

Section Through Walkway & Steps Scale: 1" = 1'-0"

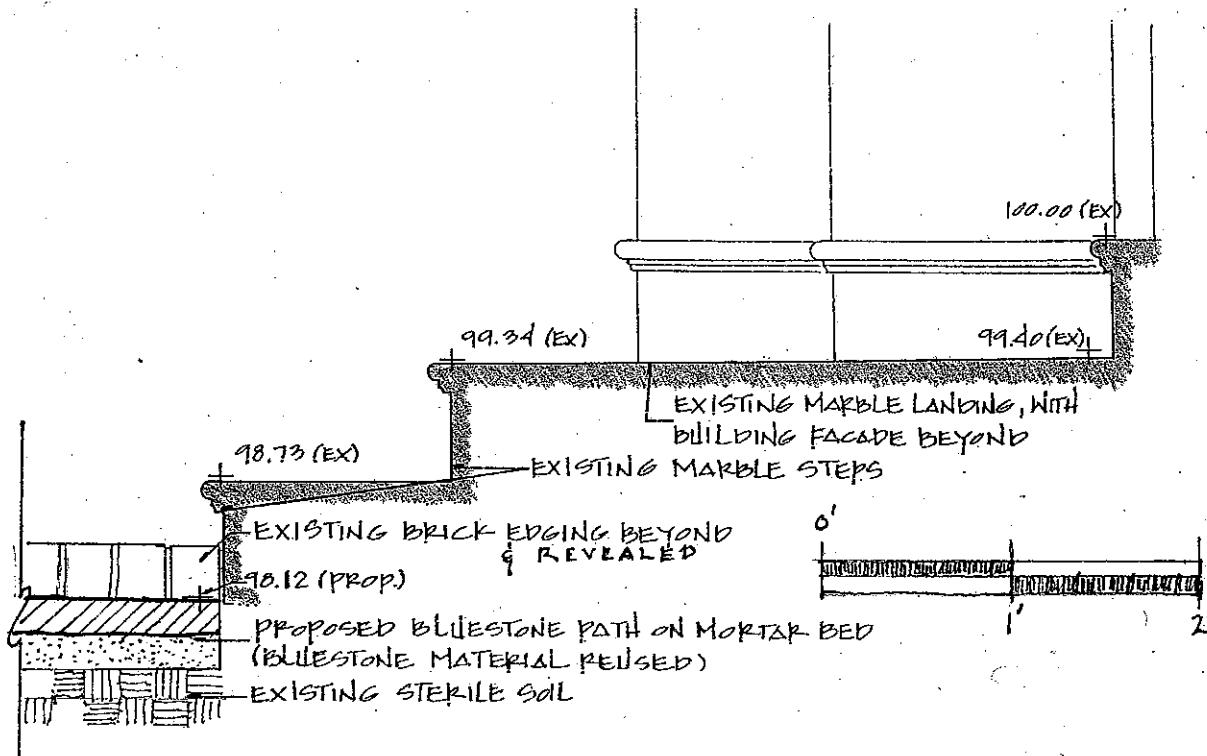


Existing Colonial Revival Work (c.1928)

Section Through Walkway Scale: 1/2" = 1'-0"

Appendix II

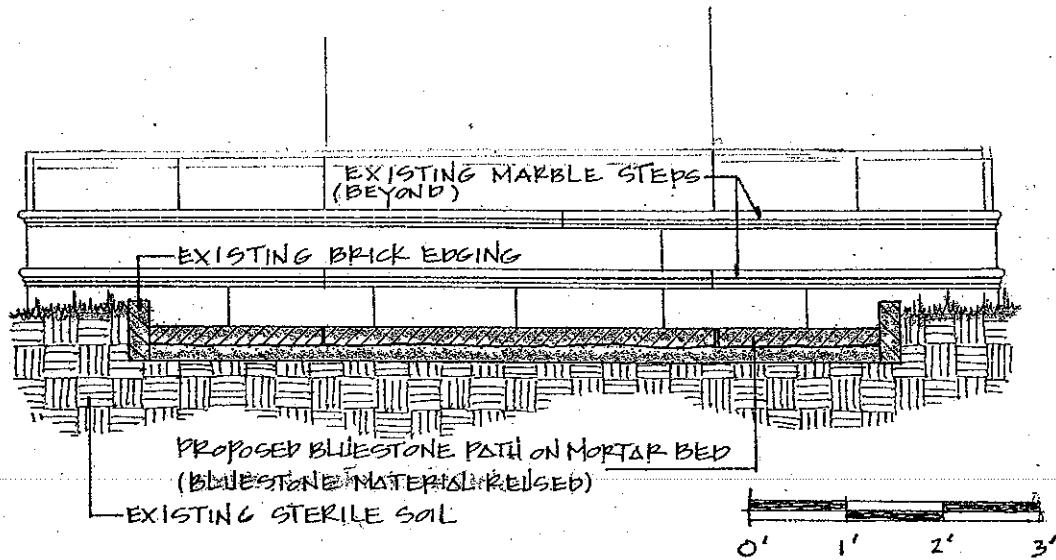
Appendix III
Proposed Alteration of Front Walk and Stair



Proposed Rehabilitation (Colonial Revival Material Reused @ Correct Ht.)

Section Through Walkway & Steps

Scale: 1" = 1'-0"

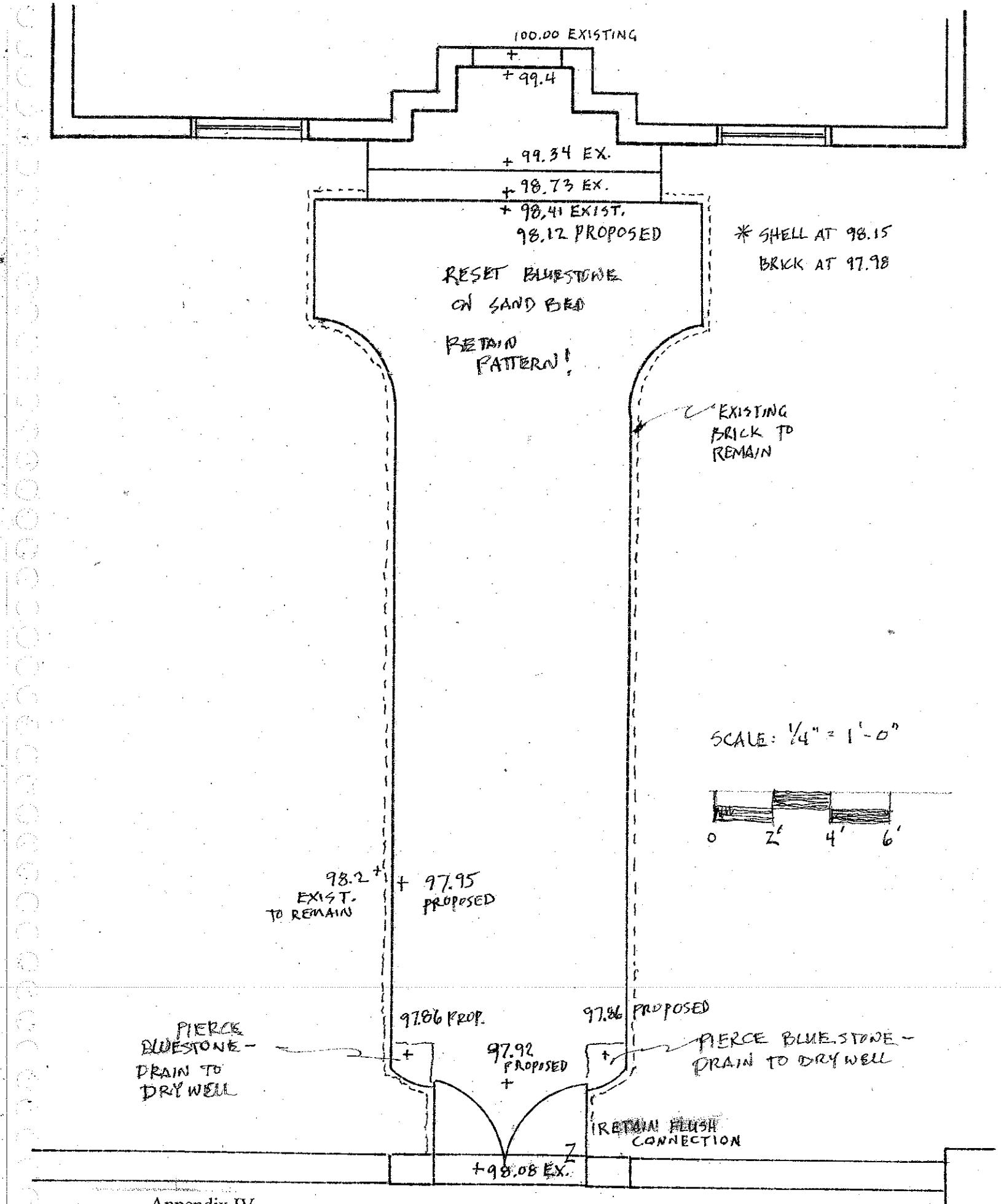


Proposed Rehabilitation (Colonial Revival Material Reused @ Correct Ht.)

Section Through Walkway Scale: 1/2" = 1'-0"

Appendix III

Appendix IV
Proposed Elevations of Walk and Stair



Appendix IV