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## 25 **BIRTHPLACE OF A NATION: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ST. GEORGE'S CAYE, BELIZE**

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*St. George's Caye played a vital role in the history and development of Belize as an independent nation. Until the 1800's, the island served as the first capital of Belize and today it continues to be featured on the Belize five-dollar bill. The Battle of St. George's Caye on September 10, 1798 also represents the end of Spain's attempts to conquer the territory that is now known as Belize. Although this battle happened over 200 years ago it still plays an important role in Belizean culture, as exemplified during the annual September Celebrations when people all over the country honor the Battle St. George's Caye. While much has been written about the history of St. George's Caye, little archaeological research has actually been conducted on the island. It is for all these reasons that the authors began to conduct archival research and interviewing landowners as part of an archaeological project that focuses on the historic significance of St. Georges Caye.*

### **Introduction**

St. George's Caye is one of hundreds of islands off the coast of Belize that are part of a large reef system, the second largest in the world. Although St. George's Caye is small, its position and shape caused it to play a predominant role in the early history of the English settlement that was to become known as Belize. The reef system forms an offshore barrier that protects the coast. Because of the difficulties of navigation, these waters provided safe haven for merchants, buccaneers, and pirates that sailed the Caribbean. To access the mainland and harbors at the mouths of the rivers, one must navigate narrow passages through the reef and then follow a complex system of channels. To reach the Belize River, the country's main river system, one must pass by St. George's Caye, thus it is a strategic location guarding the port (Figure 1). Additionally, the Caye is crescent shaped making it ideal for careening ships on its leeward side (Figure 2).

### **The 1600's – Early History and Initial English Settlement**

By the mid 1600s English pirates, buccaneers, and merchants were sailing the waters off the coast of Belize. Although the Spanish had settled areas to the north, west, and south, they did not attempt to establish a settlement in Belize. In 1677 Spanish Fray Jose Delgado and a small party were passing through Belize on their way to Bacalar and were captured by English pirates along the coast a few miles south of Belize City. They were taken to the English leader, the infamous pirate,

Bartholomew Sharpe who was temporarily headquartered on St. George's Caye (Delgado 1677; Thompson 1988:41). The priest and his party stayed on the Caye for a while, were treated well, and then taken to the north and released unharmed.

During the late 1600's English woodcutters, or Baymen as they are known, settled on St. George's Caye and at the mouth of the Belize River. The settlement that eventually becomes known as Belize has no official name at this time but appears in the various records as: English Settlement on the Bay of Honduras; English Settlement at the mouth of the River Walix; Settlement of English Woodcutters in the Bay of Honduras; English Settlement of Honduras; and The Bay Settlement.

### **Origin of the Name Belize**

The beginnings of the Settlement on the Bay and the origin of the name "Belize" have been the subject of discussion and debate since the first written history of the Settlement (1826 Honduras Almanak). At times these debates have "stuck to the facts" and at others have strayed into the realm of legend. Listed here are the various spellings and dates for the variations of the name Belize (Figure 3): Balis (1677) in Fray Jose Delgados's journey to Bacalar; Bullys (1705) in a letter from John Fingas to the Council of Trade; Bellese (1720) in a report of Captain Nathan Uring's voyage to Belize; Valis (1724) Report in Madrid of the number of English settlers; Valiz (1783) in Spanish map

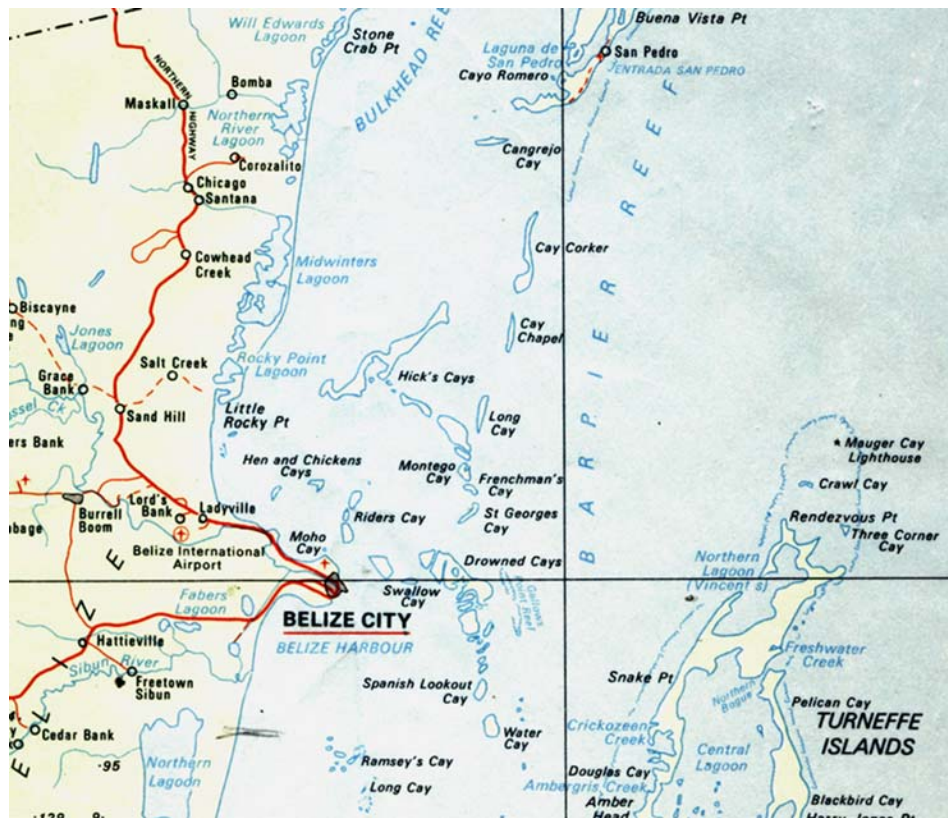


Figure 1. Area map – Belize City and Cayes



Figure 2. Satellite photo of St. George's Caye

showing “Rio de Valiz /Yngles River Bellese”; Balleze and Bellese (1786) on map made by “a Bay Man” showing area allotted to Great Britain for the cutting of Logwood (Figure 4); Walix (1786) on Spanish map showing logwood area occupied by the English settlers; Wallix (1790) from a map by Rafael Llobet (map is labeled in Spanish); Belize (1790) in letter from Peter Hunter (Superintendent of the Bay Settlement) to Baltasar Rodruguis.

### The “Wallace” Hypothesis

The notion that the name Belize came from someone named Wallace, Wallace, or Willis is first reported in the 1827 Honduras Almanak. Below is a passage from Sir John Burdon’s *Archives of British Honduras* published in 1931 that summarizes these claims.

*“In the 1827 Almanak the credit for discovering the mouth of the River Belize and making it his place of retreat is given to Wallace, a Lieutenant amongst the Buccaneers, from whose name ‘Belize’ is said to be derived. The 1839 Almanak gives the founder as the Scotch Corsair chief Wallace, native of Falkland in Kinross-shire, who, after being driven from Tortuga, erected huts and a fortalice at the spot called after him by the Spaniards ‘Wallis’ or ‘Balis’.*

*Bridges (1828) states that Willis, the notorious Buccaneer and ex-Governor of Tortuga, was the first Englishman to settle on the river, to which he gave his name. He dates this 1638, the year in which the Spaniards drove the Buccaneers out of Tortuga. Bancroft, ‘History of Central America,’ gives Peter Wallace, with 80 men, as the first settlers at Belize River. And finally, Francisco Asturias (1925) a Guatemalan historian, states that the Settlement was founded by Wallace, formerly Raleigh’s First Lieutenant and right hand man, who, he says, is supposed to have first reached Belize in 1617.” (Burdon 1931:2-3).*

It is important to point out that a number of modern professional historians have noted that no documents dating to the 1600s have been referenced or produced to substantiate the claim that someone named Wallace, Wallace, or Willis was in Belize at this time.

### The “Maya” Hypothesis

Starting in the 1950s several researchers have suggested that the name Belize has its origins in the Mayan language. A. H. Anderson, the first archaeological Commissioner of British Honduras suggests that the word Belize is a derived from the forgotten Maya name for the river (Anderson 1958:35). Sir J. Eric Thompson, noted Mayanist, states that Beliz in Yucatec Maya signifies muddy or muddy water (Thompson 1988:43 original manuscript presented to Belize 1970). Assad Shoman (1994) suggests the words Belakin (land towards the sea), Baltiz (land of the Itza) or Beliz (muddy waters). And finally, Emory King (1999) reports Belikin meaning land of muddy water.

It is important to note that the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex*, by far the most thorough dictionary of Yucatec Maya, does not list Beliz, Belakin, Baltiz, or Belikin. Maya words are composed of phonemes (vowel consonant combinations) and each can carry several meanings. Within the *Cordemex* dictionary one of the many meanings for “be” is muddy water and “bel ha” means canal or aqueduct. There is, however, no historical record of the Maya referring to the Belize area by any of these names.

### The “African” Hypothesis

David Hernandez (1990) suggests that the name Belize is an example of linguistic convergence in that slaves who came from the Cabinda Province of Angola were already familiar with the name as there is a river and village named Belize in that locale. The main problem with this hypothesis is that most enslaved Angolans were taken to Brazil by the Portuguese and hard evidence for their presence in Belize is lacking.

### The “Bullys River - Rogues Point” Hypothesis

In a 1705 report to the Council of Trade in London, John Fingas notes the “River of Bullys” where the English load their logwood. A 1786 map of the Bay Settlement shows the present day location of Government House as “Rogues Point”. Emory King (1999:9-10)



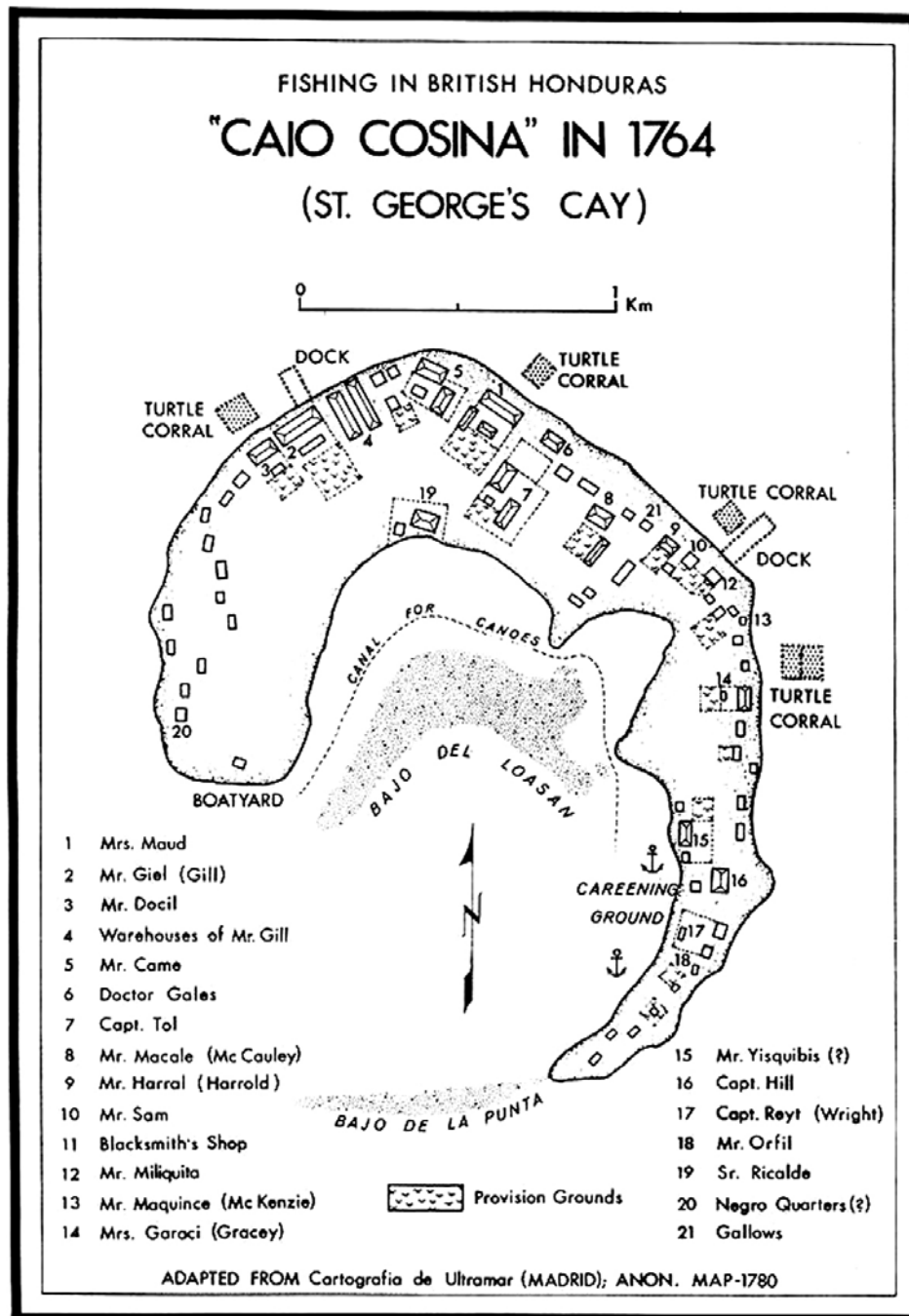


Figure 5. 1764 Spanish map of St. George's Caye (Cayo Cosina)

### The "Spanish" Hypothesis

It is interesting to note that scholars have sought the origins for the word Belize in English, Mayan, and African languages. No published sources that we are aware of have suggested the origin to lie in the Spanish language. This is ironic for several early Spanish maps show Spanish names for

numerous locations within Belize. A search of an 18<sup>th</sup> century dictionary revealed an interesting possibility (Nuevo Tesoro Lexiconografico de la Lengua Espanola -1739). The word "valiza" (pronounced "baliza" and spelled "baliza" in later dictionaries) is a nautical term that refers to a marker placed by a canoe, or launch at the entrance of ports so that ships can enter by not

touching shoals or shallows. In more recent dictionaries, the word “valais” refers to lumber.

1764 Map Names	Burnaby's Code Signers
Mr. Giel	Nehemiah Gale
Capt. Reyt	William Wyatt
Mr. Orfil	John Oliver
Mr. Harrol	James Ferrall
Mr. Yisquibis	D. Fitzgibbons
Mr. Come	Benjamin Bascome
Mr. Sam	Andrew Slumen
Mr. Ricalde	Thomas Roblie
Mr. Tol	William Dal
Mrs. Maud	John Maud
Capt. Hill	Mary Wil

**Table 1.** Possible matches between 1764 map and 1765 signers of Burnaby's Code

Either of these meanings would be appropriate. The first would be a logical nautical notation and the second would be a reasonable reference to the river mouth as it is clear from several sources that forest products were loaded at this location.

Throughout the 1600s English mariners (pirates, buccaneers, merchants) were sailing the waters off Belize and would have made landings on the cayes or mainland. However, we should note that most modern historians have rejected claims of English settlement in Belize prior to 1670 due to lack of evidence. We find it interesting that two of the earliest references to the River, “Balis” (Spanish reference in 1677) and “Bullys” (English reference in 1705) are the closest in spelling and pronunciation to “Belize” than many of the variations that follow in subsequent decades. No doubt the debate will continue as to the origin of the name Belize but we hope that the information listed above will be help to promote more objective discussion.

**Burnaby's Code – Belize's First Constitution**

The 1700s witnessed continuous struggles between Britain and Spain. Spain claimed sovereignty over Belize but at times granted logging rights to English cutters. The English settlers were not permitted to have plantations or establish a government. In 1765

Admiral Burnaby was sent from Jamaica (by orders from London) to the settlement to look into disputes between the English woodcutters and the Spanish to the north in what is today Mexico. While at St. George's Caye, the Baymen had Admiral Burnaby put into the King's English the code of law they had been operating under. This code was in part based on the democratic principles of pirate law of the sea. It became known as “Burnaby's Code” and was signed on April 9, 1765 on St. George's Caye by 85 Baymen including two women. Burnaby's Code served as the Belize's constitution from 1765 until 1862 when it became a British Colony (British Honduras).

A Spanish map of St. George's Caye from 1764 shows the location of properties, houses, gallows, etc (Figure 5). The English names of property owners are shown, but it is written by someone who only spoke Spanish, thus the names are awkward and misspelled. Interestingly, this map was made one year before the signing of Burnaby's Code and thus several of the signers should be shown on the map. As far as we know, no historians have ever made this connection. By comparing the awkward / misspelled names on the map with the list of those who signed Burnaby's Code, we have been able to make several matches and are now able to locate the houses and properties of



several of Belize's founding fathers and mothers (Table 1).

### **The Battle of St. George's Caye – The Fight for Independence**

Although Burnaby's Code provided the basis for law and order in the settlement, it did not resolve the disputes with Spain. In 1779 the Spanish captured St. George's Caye and took approximately 350 of its inhabitant's prisoner. Most, or possibly all, of those that were not taken prisoner fled the settlement. The prisoners were taken to Fort Bacalar (near Chetumal Mexico) and then marched to Merida, Yucatan. From there they were taken to Havana and imprisoned until their release in 1783. The settlement and the Cayes were eventually reoccupied by the Baymen. Tensions between Spain and Britain continued and it became clear that Spain intended to invade and retake the Bay Settlement. Remembering the horrors of imprisonment from the previous invasion, the Baymen assembled to make a decision as to whether they should evacuate or fight. In the largest public meeting held in the settlement up to that point the vote was taken. Fifty-one voted to evacuate and sixty-five voted to stay and fight. The deciding votes to stay and fight were cast by fourteen freed slaves (Burdon 1931:25), most from the Belize River village of Flowers Bank.

In late August 1798, the Spanish assembled a sizeable flotilla to re-take Belize. It consisted of 31 warships, 2000 troops, and 500 sailors. The Baymen defenses, meager by comparison, consisted of one British warship, the HMS Merlin; two private sloops, the Towser and the Tickler; two private schooners, the Swinger and the Teaser; and seven small gunflats. By all accounts, the Baymen were outgunned and out-manned. Between September 3-10, 1798 the Spanish made several advances on St. George's Caye. Their final advance was made on September 10. The battle lasted approximately 2 ½ hours after which the Spanish fleet sailed off in defeat (Burdon 1931:27-28). It was Spain's last attempt to take Belize by force. Although outgunned and outmanned the Bayman defenses won out due to superior leadership, strategy, and knowledge of the shallow water and channels. The Spanish suffered from poor leadership, inadequate

knowledge of the channels and shoals, poor strategy, and illness (yellow fever and the flux had swept through the Spanish force).

### **Conclusion**

The Battle of St. George's Caye forever changed the path of Belizean history. The self-governing settlement attracted groups of various ethnicities that, even today, give Belize a multicultural feel which distinguishes it from surrounding countries. It is our hope to recover and document the archaeological remains associated with events before and after the historic battle. The project will include continued archival research, documenting artifacts collected by landowners, excavations, as well as underwater archaeology.

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