
XX ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE “GREY LADY” GHOST OF ST. GEORGE’S CAYE

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One of Belize’s most often told ghost stories is that of the “Grey Lady” ghost of St. George’s Caye. A search of the internet, archives, and interviews with island residents has revealed three distinct versions of the story. One involves a lady friend of the famous pirate Captain Henry Morgan, another involves a headless ghost searching for her lost lover, and the third is the story of a young girl who drowned during the horrific hurricane that struck Belize on September 10, 1931. Archival research, interviews, archaeological investigations, and a search of a Belize cemetery have revealed the facts surrounding this intriguing story.

Introduction

The concept of a “Grey Lady” ghost is quite common in British folklore. They are believed to typically inhabit castles, hospitals, and libraries. The grey gowns that they typically wear are said to have their origin in the grey uniforms worn by nurses in British military hospitals. While conducting archaeological research on St. George’s Caye, residents frequently referred to, and talked about, the Grey Lady Ghost that inhabits their island. In the course of our research we had an opportunity to excavate a feature that was reportedly associated with the ghost. In the course of our research we encountered three distinct versions of the Grey Lady story.

Version 1

Several internet web sites (Moon Belize Travel Guide, Belize Trip Advisor, and Caribbean Property Magazine) tell a version of the Grey Lady ghost story that involves the famous 18th century English pirate Sir Henry Morgan (Figure 1). The following can be found on several internet web sites.

In all good myths and legends, the details are often sketchy, but facts are usually delicious. The famous legend centers around Captain Morgan’s lady, who he brought with him during one of his sojourns to Belize. This lady it seems was a very independent and tempestuous woman. One stormy night, after a particularly fierce quarrel, having to do with the seaman who was standing watch the night before, Captain Morgan forced his lady to walk the plank into the ocean off St. George’s Caye. She wore a gray gossamer gown that fateful

night, whipping around her legs in the angry wind. The lady in grey has been roaming St. George’s Caye trying to find her lover. Don’t scoff – some islanders will speak no ill of the Grey Lady, and on stormy nights they stay safely behind closed doors.

While Captain Morgan’s exploits in the Caribbean have been well documented, there is no evidence of his presence in the waters immediately around St. George’s Caye.



Figure 1. Popular 18th century woodcut of Sir Henry Morgan

Version 2

Another version of the Grey Lady ghost story was told to us by children of property owners on St. George’s Caye. In this version,



Figure 2. Lady Jane Grey, the “Nine Days Queen” of England.



Figure 3. Beheading of Lady Jane Grey

the Grey Lady is a headless woman who roams the caye at night searching for her lover/husband who was lost at sea during a rough storm. A sheet of zinc that had blown off a roof during the storm apparently decapitated her. Those who told us this version were all in their teens or early twenties. In all likelihood, the “headless” aspect of this story has been influenced by Hollywood and the true story of Lady Jane Grey the “Nine Days Queen” of England (Figure 2).

Lady Jane Grey was queen of England for only nine days (July 10-19, 1553). She was beheaded on February 12, 1554. Her story is well known in British history and folklore. Her beheading has been the subject of several stories and been featured in several works of art (Figure 3). There is a website that sells dolls of beheaded famous historical figures including Lady Jane Grey. Version two of the St. George’s Grey Lady story is the fusion or syncretism of the headless Lady Jane Grey with the popular British concept of Grey Lady ghosts and the bloody headless ghost stories of Hollywood.



Figure 4. Photo of Heloise “Jim” Masson (center in dark suit) ca. 1925. Photo courtesy of Van Bibber family photo collection.

Version 3

This version was recounted to us by several island property owners. It is the story of a young girl who was killed on St. George’s Caye in the hurricane of 1931. She has reportedly been seen as a ghost by island residents and visitors and is simply known as the “Grey Lady”. The girl’s name is Heloise Masson (Figure 4). While her mother was pregnant with Heloise, the Masson family received word that a relative, Jim Masson, who had signed up with a British regiment to fight in WWI, was killed in Europe (Figure 5). The family believed that the new baby would be “Jim”. Although named Heloise, she was always known as “Jim”. “Jim” was out on St. George’s Caye visiting friends when the hurricane struck on September 10, 1931. This was one of the most devastating hurricanes to hit Belize in historic times. All of



Figure 5. Photo of Jim Masson, WWI soldier killed in Europe. Photo courtesy of Masson family

the houses on the cay were of wood and could not provide adequate shelter in a hurricane. The following details come from a written account of one the survivors. As was the custom, the islanders tied themselves in a rope chain fastened to the sturdiest feature they could find. In this case it was the foundation of a large water vat. “Jim” was the first on the line, closest to the vat. The winds and storm surges caused the vat to topple, pinning “Jim”, still alive, amongst the debris. Others on the rope tried to frantically remove the debris and pull her out but to no avail. She drowned as the waves surged over her head. After the storm passed the survivors were able to find shelter and spend the night in what the author of the account described as a toppled octagonal metal water tank a nearby yard. The following day a sailboat showed up and took them to Belize City. “Jim’s” body was

wrapped in a sheet and pulled behind them in a dory. When they reached Belize City Jim’s father was there and took charge of the body.

After her death, islanders would occasionally see an apparition of a young girl that they believed was “Jim” and refer to her as the “Grey Lady”. She is reported to have been seen in front yards and verandas and is supposedly a good or friendly ghost not wishing to cause anyone harm or ill will.



Figure 6. Surface photo -bricks of the water vat foundation

The Archaeology

While conducting a pedestrian survey of the island, we encountered a row of mortared bricks angled in the ground (Figure 6). The bricks appeared to be the typical English red/orange bricks that were used as ship ballast. Similar bricks were used in the construction of burial monuments in the cemetery as well as older buildings in Belize City. Bricks of this type were loaded as ballast into the hulls of ships leaving England and were dumped prior to taking on their heavy loads of mahogany. We asked the landowner, Paul Hunt, if he knew anything about the brick feature. He informed us that he had been told that it was the foundation for the water vat that pinned “Jim” in the 1931 hurricane. What can be seen in Figure 6 is the same feature that Mr. Hunt had seen. We contacted John Masson, of Belize City, who had seen the intact feature as a boy. He remembered the feature being approximately 15 feet across and a few feet high.

We opened an excavation area to clear what remained of the feature. Unfortunately, the water table is very high and we encountered water approximately 15 cm below the surface. By using a gasoline powered bilge pump we were able to remove enough water to clear all



Figure 7. Excavation of the water vat foundation.



Figure 8. Gravestone of “Jim” Masson, Lords Ridge Cemetery, Belize City

but the deepest part of the feature (Figure 7). As can be seen in the photo it has six sides. We do not know if this is the foundation of the tank that pinned “Jim” or was perhaps the foundation of the tank in which the survivors sought shelter (note that the written account referred to the shelter tank as having eight sides). The brick construction is extremely well made and designed. Only minor cracking on a few of the bricks was evident. Although the feature is at a steep angle due to undercutting, it appears intact. The quality of the brickwork is such that it had to have been designed and constructed by experienced bricklayers. Bricklayers had been brought over from England to construct St. John’s Church in Belize City. The overall style of the construction, particularly the small steps at the base is very similar to the brickwork of the sugar mill at Indian Church and is probably of the same period (1860s).

Additionally, John Masson informed us that “Jim” is buried in Lords Ridge Cemetery (Belize City) and that her grave is marked “Jim”.

With his assistance we located the grave (Figure 8). The information on the stone confirms many elements of the story.

IN LOVING MEMORY
OF
HELOISE ALICE MASSON
“JIM”
BORN SEP. 6TH 1917
DIED DURING THE TERRIFIC HURRICANE ON
SEPT. 10TH 1931
ST. GEORGE’S CAYE B.H.
THOU SHOULDST CALL ME TO RESIGN
WHAT MOST I PRIZE, IT NEVER WAS MINE
I ONLY YIELD THEE WHAT IS THINE
THY WILL BE DONE

The Grey Lady ghost story is one of Belize’s most commonly told stories. Through archival research, interviews, and archaeology we were able to reveal the true elements of this part of Belize history.

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