
XX THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ST. GEORGE'S CAYE: RESULTS OF THE 2010 SEASON

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There is no question that St. George's Caye played a critical role in the history and independence of Belize. Historic records have clearly documented the importance of the Caye and its position during the Battle of St. George's Caye in 1798 when the Baymen successfully repelled Spain's attempt to take Belize by force. While this location is a significant part of Belize's history, very little archaeology has been done on the island. During the 2010 season the primary focus of excavation was the local cemetery where several historic burials were re-located. The remains of a historic British Army officer's camp were also recovered.

Introduction

St. George's Caye played a vital role in the history and development of Belize as an independent nation. This small caye is one of hundreds of islands off the coast of Belize that are part of large reef system, the second largest in the world. Its predominant role in the early history of the English settlement was due to its position and shape (Figure 1). 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. In order to reach the Belize River, the country's main river system, one must pass by St. George's Caye, thus its strategic location guarding the port (Garber et. al. 2010).

St. George's Caye was the primary habitation for the initial English settlement and served as Belize's first capital. English and Spanish presence has been documented in the region since about 1550 when they began to exploit logwood around the Gulf of Campeche. This wood was indispensable for the dying of woolen goods in black, grey, purple and dark red. In 1677 Dominican Fray Joseph Delgado, traveled from Vera Paz (Guatemala) to Bacalar (Mexico) via southern Belize and across the Sarstoon River and then up the coast, where the English seized him, led by Bartholomew Sharpe, who had his headquarters at St. George's Caye. This incident confirms from Spanish records the presence of Englishmen in Belize in 1677. We are not sure



Figure 1. Map showing location of St. George's Caye.

when St. George's Caye was initially occupied but it was established as the first capital of Belize by the early 1700's. The Spanish captured the Caye in 1779 and a number of the residents were taken as prisoners to Cuba. When they returned, the settlement on the St. George's Caye was re-established in 1784 and the capital was moved to Belize City (Burdon 1931; Shoman 1994; Thompson 1988).

The Battle of St. George's Caye on September 10, 1798 represented the end of Spain's attempts to conquer the territory that is now known as Belize. After the vote to stay and fight, the Spanish were permanently driven off and a British military outpost was established on the Caye. Although Spanish never returned, the British military did not initially allow settlers back on the Caye after the battle.

Although this battle happened over 200 years ago, it is still plays a large role in Belizean

culture, history, and identity. Even a revisionist view of Belizean history cannot reduce the importance of this conflict. This legacy is seen during the annual September Celebrations when people all over the country honor the Battle of St. George's Caye. These celebrations are seen as a unifying event and many Belizeans refer to the defenders of the Caye as "our forefathers" – unifying all Belizeans and not distinguishing between the different groups that existed at the time (Straughan 1998).



Figure 2. Thomas Potts tomb, St. George's Caye.

The Cemetery at St. George's Caye

The primary focus of the 2010 season was the St. George's Caye cemetery. Were it not for a one modern era burial crypt and a few modern memorial markers, one would hardly know the St. George's Caye cemetery was a burial ground much less the oldest non-Maya historic cemetery in Belize. Storm surges, hurricanes, vandalism, and the ravages of time have obliterated virtually all signs of its once striking appearance (Garber et. al. 2011).

Records indicate that the cemetery was reasonably well maintained into the 1920s. Destruction began with the hurricane of 1931 followed by hurricanes Hattie in 1961 and Greta in 1978. Hurricane Hattie did significant damage to the cemetery cutting an E-W channel across the width of the island, removing the southern edge of the cemetery and the cemetery's most notable marker, the elaborate above ground burial crypt of Thomas Potts (Figure 2). According to residents, the tomb slid into the cut, which was later filled in to prevent additional erosion. The exact location is not

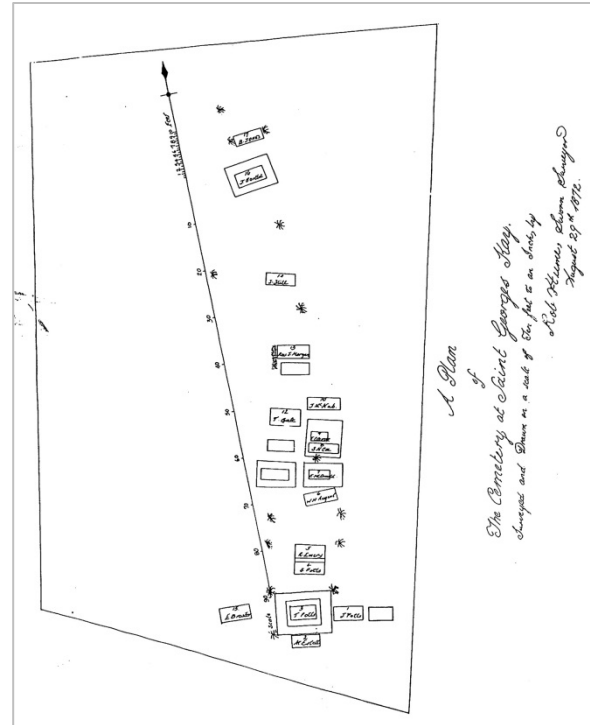


Figure 3. 1872 map of St. George's Caye cemetery by R. Hume.

known but it is apparently now outside the limits of the cemetery wall. Erosion from hurricane Greta in 1978 exposed a marble medallion that appears to be from the Potts' tomb (Garber et. al. 2011).

Photographs of the cemetery taken prior to the hurricanes indicate that it was once very similar in appearance to Yarborough Cemetery in Belize City. The graves typically consisted of a low rectangular platform composed of coursed red bricks held together by coarsely tempered cement capped with a large white marble or black sandstone slab upon which is an inscribed epitaph. These bricks were brought over from Europe as ballast in the hulls of ships and were used in a variety of building constructions such as St. John's Church and older buildings in Belize City. Residents indicate that there were once numerous unmarked graves in the St. George's Caye cemetery as well. Residents also note that after the hurricanes had broken up many of the stones, lobster fishermen used them for ballast in their traps.

The cemetery on St. George's Caye is the earliest known European cemetery in Belize. It and the slightly later Yarborough Cemetery in

Belize City were known as the burial grounds for the congregation of St. John's Church, which was built in 1812. Records do not indicate when the St. George's Caye cemetery was initially established and it is not shown on the 1764 map of the Caye. The earliest carved stone on record is 1787 and our excavations this past summer confirmed earlier unmarked graves. A map made in 1872 (Figure 3) documented the location of 20 graves in the cemetery prior to the destruction of the hurricanes, and James Purcell Usher recorded 21 epitaphs in 1907 (Usher 1907). In 1926 Thomas Gann noted an additional epitaph (Gann 1926). Mary Check-Pennel (1989) also documented eight additional burials in her comprehensive study of cemeteries in Belize. In modern times, only a few memorial stones have been placed in the cemetery along with one modern burial (Garber et al. 2011).

The Officer's Barracks

Based on a high density of material recovered from a test pit in 2009 at the back of the cemetery five new excavation units were placed in this area – parallel to the back of the modern cemetery wall (Bentley et al. 2011). Materials recovered from the upper levels typically included whole Queen conch shells, brick, and mortar (not arranged in any specific pattern) and were most likely deposited by various storm surges that have passed across the Caye. A high concentration of military artifacts suggests that this was a midden associated with military officers barracks. These artifacts included a number of West Indies Regiment buttons (Figure 4). West India Regiments were infantry units of the British Army recruited from those stationed in the Caribbean Colonies from 1795 to 1927. The first button was recovered in 2009 and belonged to the 7th West Indies Regiment (Figure 4, left). Although historical documents indicate that several detachments of various West Indies regiments (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th) served in Belize, the 7th was apparently never assigned there. Friends in different regiments may exchange buttons as souvenirs (Palacio 1976). In 1812 Lt. Colonel George Arthur purchased a majority of the 7th Regiment and soon after was given the post of assistant quartermaster general in Jamaica where the 7th



Figure 4. British military buttons recovered on St. George's Caye: left, 7th West Indian Regiment; center, Duke of York 5th West Indian Regiment; right, 2nd Regiment of foot.

was formed. Here he began his career with the Colonial Office and was appointed Superintendent of the Bay Settlement (Belize). He served in that post from 1814-1822 and may have brought some of his best soldiers from the 7th with him (Garber et al. 2011).

Several buttons inscribed with "Duke of York W. Indian Regiment" and the Roman numeral "V", indicating it was part of the 5th West Indian Regiment were also located (Figure 4, center). A number of these buttons had an interesting back mark produced by die stamping: "I Nutting & Son". These buttons were from Covent Garden in London, which were big producers of military buttons between 1800 and 1829 (Naylor 1993). It is interesting to note that on one of the button backs the word Covent is misspelled as Coevent. During the second half of the eighteenth century there was already "an existing demands for imitation precious metalwares" (Clifford 1999:241). There is some evidence that craftsmen would deliberately misspell marks, most often on Pewter plates, to give the impression that their product was a superior imported product (for example using "LQDON" instead of "LONDON") (Benahmu 1991; Clifford 1999).

We also located a button with the number "2" over a crown from the British Army Second Regiment of foot (Figure 4, right). The British Army started marking buttons in 1767 and this button is similar to buttons that date from 1855 to 1881. This regiment is known for participating in Battles against the French in the West Indies (1794 to 1797), Ireland (1798), Holland (1799), and Egypt (1800) and is thought to have served as marines in various other battles. The earliest button recovered is copper with no back mark and likely dates before 1750. Buttons with back marks were not produced



Figure 5. Artifacts from St. George's Caye: left, pipe bowls and stems; right gambling die.

until the second half of the 18th century ("2nd (Queens Royal") Regiment of Foot").

A silver Spanish Real from 1775 was also recovered from these units in the back of the cemetery. Spanish Reals were used as legal tender in North America and in England during the late 1700's (Martin 1977). The Spanish 8 Real was the inspiration for the American silver dollar.

Other artifacts that support the interpretation of this deposit as a military midden include a lead grapeshot ball, a gun mechanism, gunflints, and several musket barrel fragments. Gunflints are seen from the early 1700s to early 1800s and were used in flintlock guns. The gun mechanism appears to be from a British Brown Bess. There were several versions of this gun. The one we have appears to be either the marine version or the East India Company version.

As one might imagine, the military out on St. George's Caye were not working all of the time. Based on the artifacts recovered there was plenty of time to smoke, drink, and gamble. Several clay pipe bowls and stems were recovered (Figure 5). These white kaolin clay tobacco pipes are typical of the pipes produced in many areas throughout England and the Netherlands around the early part of the 17th century. Most pipes were distributed locally; however, port towns and cities allowed for overseas trading thus bringing clay pipes to the North American colonies. These pipes were extremely inexpensive, resulting in all social and economic classes owning and disposing of them. There were typically broken and discarded within one to two years (Walker 1977).

Gambling was a powerful economic and social force in the English speaking world from

1660s to 1800s and Englishmen were said to have bet on everything from dog fights, births, deaths, races, chess, and even military actions. The onset of the Revolutionary War did nothing to slow down gamblers. The Continental and British armies tossed dice and cards into the knapsacks and marched off to fight.

For commanders on both sides, gambling was a constant problem. George Washington's headquarters repeatedly issued orders trying to stop the military to stop wagering. Washington shouldn't have worried as the British army was facing the same problem. "The men are given to great gambling," an English officer wrote, "and most shan't have a coin left, even parting with their shirts at the dice and sundry card games." (Crews 2008). Our two die recovered from St. George Caye suggest the military here was also gambling (Figure 5).



Figure 6. Artifacts from St. George's Caye: left, latticino stemware; right decanter stoppers.

Evidence of drinking is found in the two glass decanter stoppers, the base of an Italian Latticino stemware glass, bottles, and other various sherds of broken glass and ceramics (Figure 6). In 18th and early 19th century drinking was considered socially acceptable, especially by military officers. This was not the case for soldiers, as drinking was thought hinder performance and cause discipline problems. The army did issue certain alcoholic beverages to the troops to maintain health and morale but these were much more monitored that what was seen with officers. Between 1755 and 1820 wine was the drink of choice for officers. In many cases the wines were "fortified" with brandy making the drink stronger and sweeter. Other alcoholic beverages included were malt liquors like beer, ale, and porter, spirits like rum, brandy, gin,

whiskey, and fermented cider. Rum was one of the more popular spirits and was seldom sold by individual bottle and instead in greater quantities. Rum was often given out for “health” issues – as a preventative and treatment for illness - with half the portion consumed before work and half after (Jones and Smith 1985; Kopperman 1996).

The most common type of bottle found in association with British military is the dark green glass wine bottle. These were thought to be multipurpose bottles also used for vinegar, linseed oil, and other non-alcoholic beverages. Decanters associated with bottles used for alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages and most are thought to be British in origin (Jones and Smith 1985).

The two primary forms used for drinking glasses were tumblers and stemware – both lead glass of British origin. Stemware seems to be mentioned in newspaper advertisements and found in archaeological context quite frequently between 1756 and 1763. After this time period there is contradictory evidence, records of sales suggest more wine glasses sold but archaeological excavations suggest tumblers were the more common form. It is also noted that tumblers, although plainer, were more expensive. Price was possibly based on the weight of glass and tumblers were heavier. Nonetheless, wine glasses were described as being “socially and aesthetically superior” to tumblers (Jones and Smith 1985:38). The latticino stem or “opaque-twist” stem –style recovered from the Caye was most popular in the late 1770’s, although they were seen earlier (Figure 6).

Records suggest that officers’ messes/barracks were organized by the 1750’s but became much more popular by the 1780’s and onward. They were developed so that “the Officers, without distinction of rank, can be properly and genteelly accommodated” (Jones and Smith 1985:113). The barracks were seen as a way to create a cohesive unit and to reinforce the status of military officers. They were considered especially important when officers were stationed outside Britain. When there was no mess area the officers were dependent on local commercial establishments, sutlers, or private dinner invitations and none of

these would have been available on St. George’s Caye. A black and white drawing titled “Life at St. George’s Caye, Belize, 1886” shows the officer’s barrack structure along with a group of British officers as well as officers wearing the traditional dress of the West Indies Regiment. This structure can also be seen in a photo from before the 1931 hurricane. Today, part of the St. George’s Caye Resort is situated where the barracks were located.

In the level below the military midden a concentration of human bone and teeth were recovered. Among these human remains were fragments of mahogany or Santa Maria wood. We believe this wood to be fragments of a burial coffin based on their association with the human remains. At the bottom of this level human long bones were located in the northeast corner of the unit at a depth of approximately 65 cm. Based on the discovery of human remains and coffin fragments we conclude that this is the remains of an unmarked grave which does not appear on the 1872 plan map (Bentley et al. 2011).

Burials

The other excavations conducted in 2010 were focused on locating the burials documented on the early cemetery maps. Excavations that exposed an empty burial chamber were expanded and a large rectangular cement object was located (Figure 7). The lid was made of a crude cement mixture with stones and marine shells (including a few whole conch shells). Earlier photos and burial platforms at Yarbrough Cemetery in Belize City suggest that the brick burial platforms were capped with cement tops upon which an inscribed marble slab was placed. In this case the marble slab was not recovered but, as mentioned earlier, many of the locals have mentioned that marble slabs broken up by storms were used as ballast in lobster traps. During excavations disarticulated human bones were recovered, which were probably originally from the burial chambers (Bentley et al. 2011). Based on cemetery maps, this is most likely the burial of John Emmons Hill who passed away on May 11, 1808.

Below the cement lid was an unmarked grave that included an articulated adult human skeleton lying on the base of a coffin made of mahogany or Santa Maria (Figure 7). The



Figure 7. St. George's Caye excavations showing burial chamber, lid, and wood coffins.



Figure 8. Brick layer at bottom of burials, St. George's Caye.

remains of a child and a child-sized coffin were placed inside the larger coffin. The remains of yet another unmarked mahogany coffin were associated with a metal gate latch and metal fence posts – most likely associated with a small fence marking a grave (Bentley et al. 2011).

As part of our plan to relocate documented graves, an excavation unit was placed between the modern day Battle of St. George's Caye Monument and the concrete base of the flagpole. On the 1872 map two graves lying side by side are shown in this area: one for Reverend John C. Mongan and the other is unmarked. Mongan's epitaph from his stone on St. George's Caye was recorded by Usher (1907) (see below). A plaque dedicated to Reverend Mongan was also placed at St. Mary's Church (Check-Pennell 1989) (see below). The layers of bricks uncovered appear to be the bottoms of two different burial chambers (no lids were found) (Figure 8). Outside the rows of bricks found several disarticulated human bones with a coffin tack embedded in a piece of mahogany or Santa Maria wood was recovered. Both burials had been severely disturbed by storm surges (Bentley et al. 2011).

Plaque from cemetery stone (Usher 1907):

In Memory of
REV'D. JOHN C. MONGAN, M.A.
INCUMBENT OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE
ON THE 22ND AUGUST, 1860
AGED 60 YEARS.

Plaque from St. Mary's Church (Check-Pennell 1989):

REV. JOHN CHARLES MONGAN, M.A.
LATE INCUMBENT OF ST. MARY'S, BELIZE
AND GARISON CHAPLAIN OF BRITISH HONDURAS
ALSO VICAR OF DISHANE
AND RECTOR OF KILNEMARTORY,
IN THE COUNTY OF CORK, IRELAND.
HE DIED ON THE 22ND DAY OF AUGUST
1860
AGED 60 YEARS
REGRETTED BY ALL WHO KNEW HIM.

"Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters."
Isaiah xxxii, 20.

Conclusions

The excavations on St. George's Caye have allowed us to confirm the presence of the British military outpost that was established on the Caye after the battle in 1798. We have also been able to re-locate a number of burials that were noted on the old cemetery maps but were

no longer visible as well as a number of unmarked graves. It is our hope to continue to document these early burials that have been obscured over the years by hurricanes and other events in order to better understand this important part of Belizean history.

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