

30 GRAVE TYPES AND BURIAL THEMES AT THE EARLY ENGLISH CEMETERY ON ST. GEORGE'S CAYE, BELIZE

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St. George's Caye is a small island 8 miles off the coast of Belize. Due to its strategic location controlling access to the mouth of the Belize River, it played a key role in the early history of Belize serving as its capital into the late 1700s. The Caye also served as the transshipment point for the export of logwood and mahogany. The owners of the mahogany works had their homes and headquarters on the Caye. Archival research has shown that the St. George's Caye cemetery is the country's oldest English Baymen cemetery. Ground penetrating radar revealed a series of anomalies that possibly indicated a substantial number of unmarked graves. Excavations conducted in the 2011 field season confirmed this and revealed the presence of several graves at a level beneath the graves located in previous field seasons. This lower level of graves consisted of mahogany or Santa Maria wood coffins which differ from the stone and brick box graves of the later period. This paper presents the grave types and examines the cultural influences on the mortuary practices of the Baymen.

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). Because of the difficulties of navigation, these waters provided safe haven for merchants, buccaneers, and pirates. 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. 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. It is not clear when St. George's Caye was initially occupied but it was established as the first capital of Belize by the early 1700s.

Within the historic records the British occupants of the Belize area are referred to by a variety of terms depending on the time period and authors of the records: 1550-1620 English corsairs, Lutheran heretics, or pirates; 1620-1700

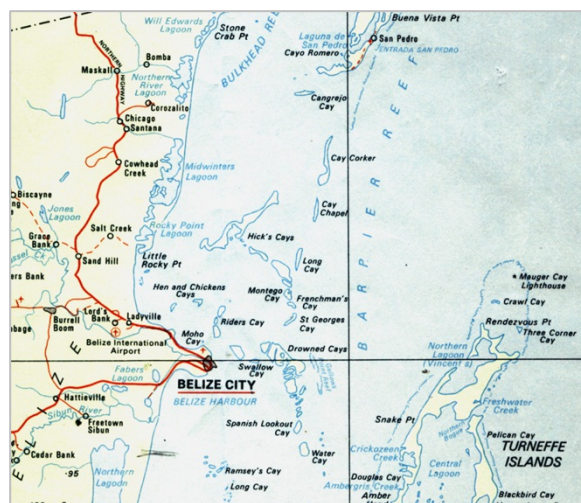


Figure 1. Map showing location of St. George's Caye.

buccaneers and pirates; 1700-1798 English logwood cutters and Baymen.

The Cemetery

The primary focus of the 2011 field 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 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; Sullivan et al. 2012).

Records indicate that the cemetery was reasonably well maintained into the 1920s. Destruction began with the hurricane of 1931

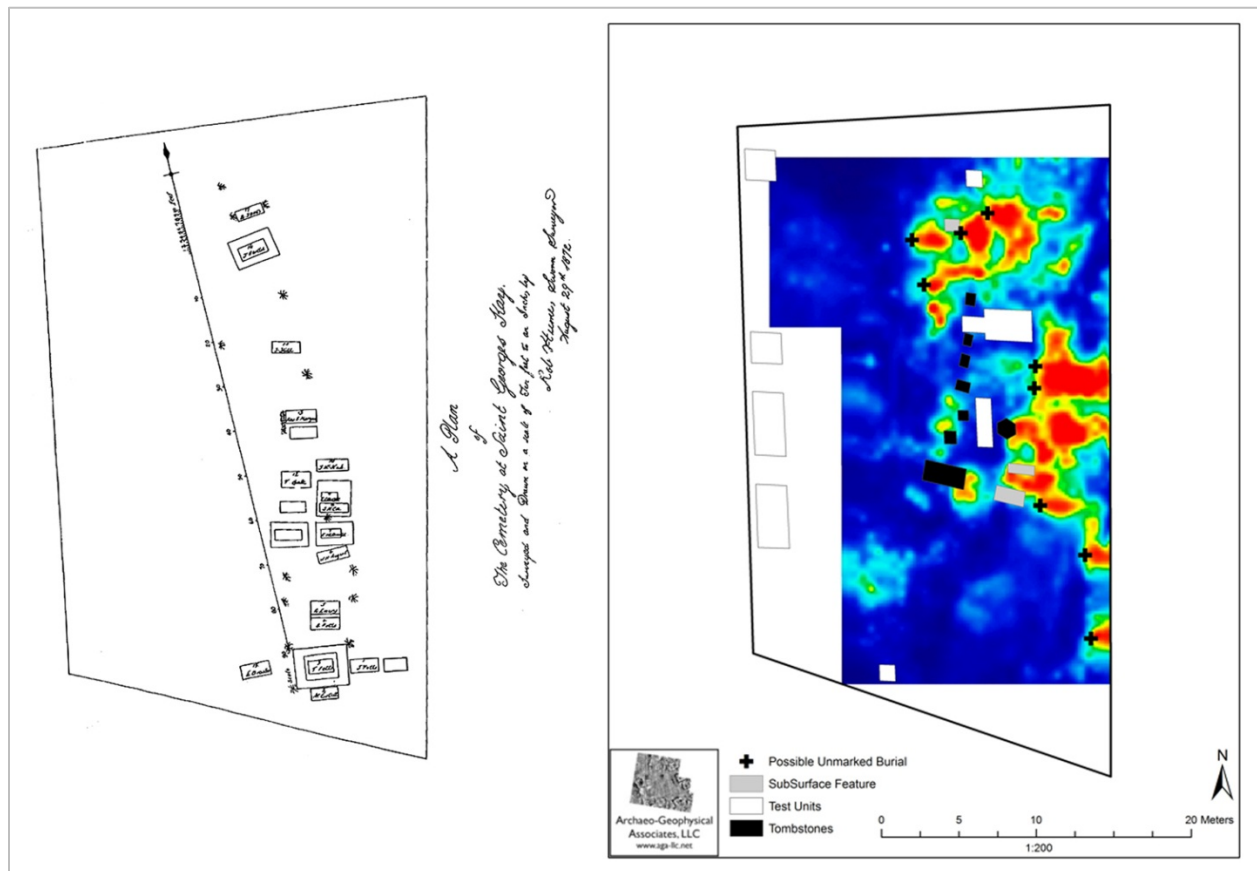


Figure 2. St. George's Caye Cemetery: left, 1872 map; right, ground penetrating radar map by Chet Walker.

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. According to residents, the tomb slid into the cut, which was later filled in to prevent additional erosion. The exact location is not known but it is apparently now outside the limits of the cemetery wall.

Photographs of the cemetery taken prior to the hurricanes indicate that it was once very similar in appearance to Yarbrough 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.

The cemetery on St. George's Caye is the earliest known European cemetery in Belize. It and the slightly later Yarbrough Cemetery 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. The earliest carved stone on record is 1787 and our excavations this past summer confirmed the presence of several earlier unmarked graves that probably date to the first half of the 1700s. A map made in 1872 (Figure 2) 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. 2010, 2011).



Figure 3. Excavations in St. George’s Caye cemetery showing pinch-toe coffins: top, pump not running; bottom, pump running.

2011 Excavations

During the 2011 field season we continued the excavations in the cemetery that were initiated in the summer of 2009. Because of consistent heavy rainfall and the fact that the Caye is low-lying, the water table remained not far from ground level throughout the 2010 and 2011 field seasons. In most areas of the cemetery, the water table was between 20-30 cm below surface. In-situ remains were encountered at about this depth and thus excavations were severely hampered. In response, we developed a method for temporarily lowering the water table in order to more accurately conduct and document excavations. This included using a high volume

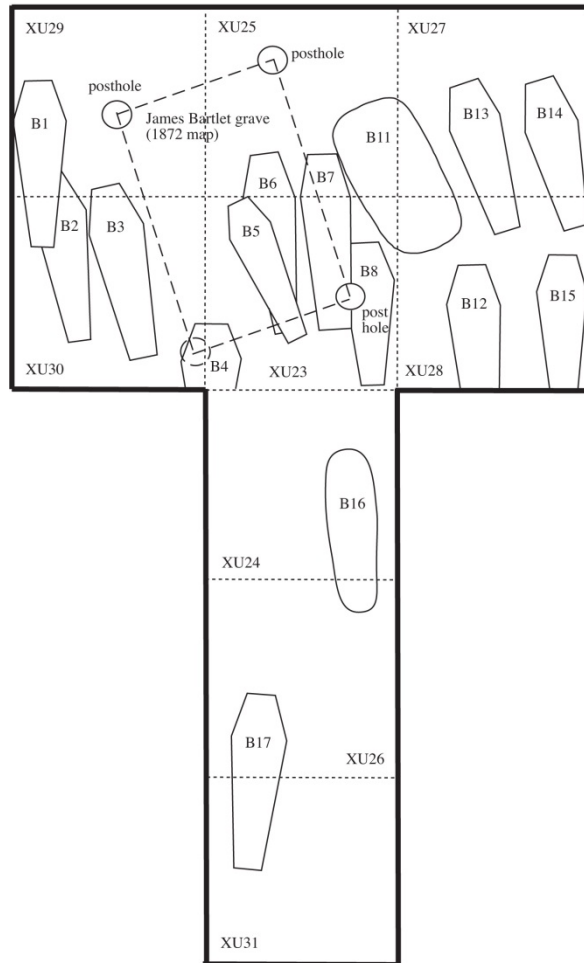


Figure 4. St. George’s Caye excavation plan map showing pinch-toe coffins.

gasoline powered bilge pump to remove water from a 1m x 1m hole located in proximity to the excavation units. This temporarily lowered the water table for a large area surrounding the 1m x 1m hole facilitating the excavation of in-situ remains (Figure 3).

Previous excavations had shown that there were burials in areas other than those indicated on the 1872 map (Garber et al. 2010, 2011; Sullivan et al. 2012). In June of 2011 we conducted a ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey of the cemetery in an attempt to locate burials that were not on the map or evident from the surface (Figure 2). The GPR survey indicated several areas of the cemetery that contained probable burials not indicated on the map. The 2011 excavations confirmed this.

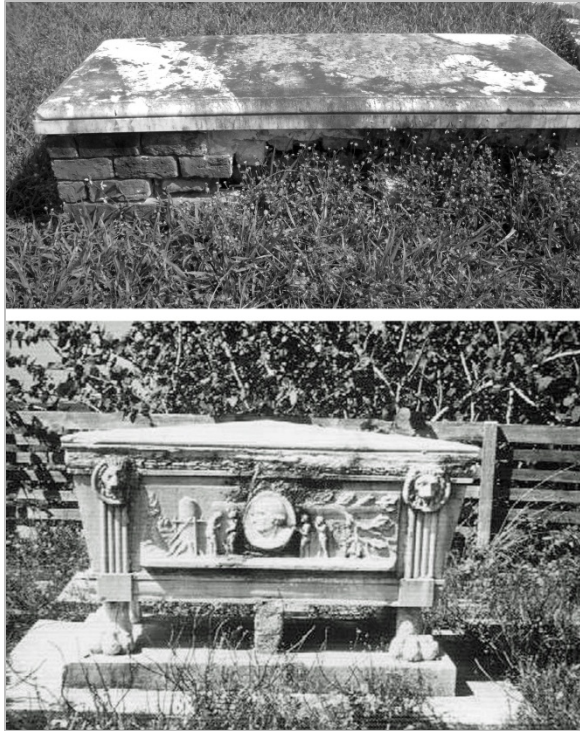


Figure 5. Grave types; top, box-grave in Yarbrough Cemetery, Belize City; bottom, above ground burial vault of Thomas Potts, St. George's Caye. Note: all of the box-graves in the St. George's Caye cemetery have been severely disturbed by hurricanes.

Grave Types and Themes

Our research has revealed the presence of three distinct grave types in the St. George's Caye cemetery (Figures 4 and 5). These grave types closely parallel grave types and themes found in England and the American Colonies and reflect the burial traditions of English culture. The grave types are: 1) pinch-toe coffin; 2) box grave; and 3) above ground box vault. Type 1 (pinch-toe coffin) is the earliest and given their position below graves of known age, we suspect that the earliest date to the first half of the 1700s. Most are made of mahogany or Santa Maria, and pine.

It must be remembered that the English occupants of St. George's Caye were actively involved in a vigorous trade network of logwood and later mahogany that connected England, the American Colonies, and the Mosquito Shore. The commercial ties with colonial Boston were particularly strong in the first half of the 1700s. Historical records indicate that Baymen merchants and captains provided logwood in Boston to be auctioned off - the proceeds of

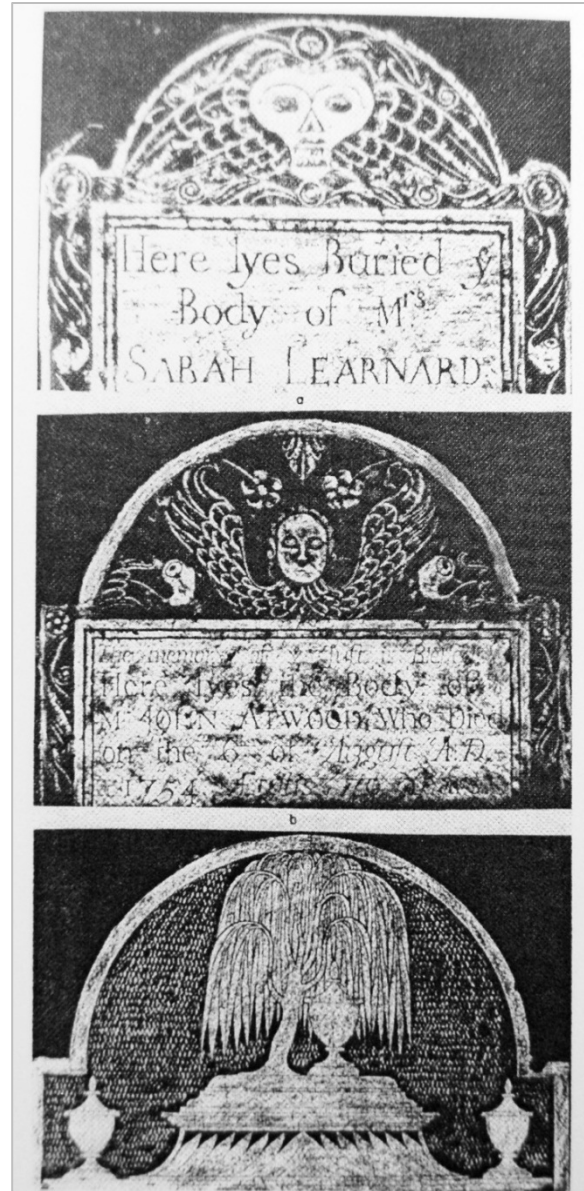


Figure 6. Colonial New England grave themes; top, death head, center, cherub; bottom, willow-urn. From Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966.

which were to fund the construction of a spire for the infamous Old North Church in Boston (Finamore 2008:75). The ties with Boston were sufficiently strong that a pew in that church was specifically reserved for the "Gentlemen of the Bay of Honduras". The plaque in that pew reads:

"The Bay Pew"
This Pew
for the use of the Gentlemen
of the Bay of Honduras
1727

It should also be noted that English loyalists such as James Yarbrough became disgruntled with events in the American Colonies and moved to the Settlement in the Bay (Belize). Cultural ties between the American Colonies and the Bay Settlement were strong and we would expect to see this reflected in burial types and themes.

A well-known and now classic study of burial marker themes in Colonial New England was conducted by Edwin Dethlfsen and James Deetz (1966). In that study, they report three time periods each with a distinct iconographic theme that reflects religious/cultural attitudes towards death (Figure 6). These are:

- Period 1: 1680-1740 Death heads
- Period 2: 1740-1760 Cherubs
- Period 3: 1760-1820 Urn and willow

Period 1 (1680-1740) represents the grimness of death and expresses themes of decay, fear, and the inevitability of death. Skulls and death heads are sometimes combined with depictions of bones, hourglasses, and coffins. Period 2 (1740-1760) reflects the Great Awakening and Beautification of Death Movement and is more upbeat, optimistic, and cheerful, emphasizing life after death and resurrection. This is revealed in the emphasis on an afterlife as seen in the use of winged human heads and Cherubs. Period 3 (1760-1820) is a continuation of the Beautification of Death Movement and emphasizes memorialization. This characterizes the Victorian era and is still a common theme in modern times.

These same themes, reflective of English/American Colonial culture in general, are clearly present in the graves of the St. George's Caye burials. Phase 1 burials are simple pinch-toe coffins. One St. George's Caye burial (B13) contained a candlesnuffer. Candle snuffers are a part of the Phase 1 iconographic program seen on some Colonial New England grave markers on which a skeleton death figure is seen holding a candle snuffer extinguishing the candle of life (Figure 7). Another St. George's Caye burial (B3) had a silver Spanish real on the forehead. It was heavily weathered but enough of the details were present to determine that it was a coin from the reign of King Phillip V (Figure 8). Throughout

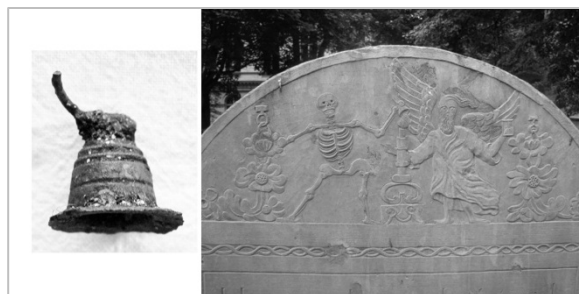


Figure 7. Candle snuffers: left, snuffer from burial on St. George's Caye; right, gravestone in Boston Massachusetts.



Figure 8. Spanish silver real: left, St. George's Caye burial; right, coin of same type.

the Hellenistic world coins were frequently included in burials as payment to the ferryman Charon who would take the soul to the land of the deceased. No above ground grave markers were found with any graves of Phase 1. Burial 1 (B1) overlaps B2 and is thus one of the later pinch-toe coffins. Interestingly, this coffin had a heart-shaped lead coffin plate nailed to its top (Figure 9). This plate was inscribed with a name, place of birth, date of birth, date of death, and age of death. Unfortunately, due to weathering, only portions of the inscription can be read but indicates a shift in tradition towards the Phase 2 and 3 themes.

Phase 3, memorialization, is expressed in many of the graves shown on the 1872 map. These graves are of the box-grave and above ground vault types. In Belize, both types are still in use today. The "box" of the box-grave is composed of a rectangular aboveground enclosure of bricks four or more courses high. These bricks were made in England and were brought over to the Bay Settlement as ship ballast. The body was placed beneath this brick feature in a sub-terranean cement enclosure. The brick feature was topped with a large slab of



Figure 9. Heart-shaped coffin plate from Burial 1 (B1), St. George's Caye cemetery.



Figure 10. Photo showing what remains of James Bartlet grave, St. George's Caye cemetery.

marble or sandstone on which was inscribed a sometimes long and detailed memorialization epitaph (see below). The inscription below was recorded by James Purcell Usher (1907). This grave was severely disturbed by subsequent hurricanes. Local informants indicated that the marble and sandstone slabs were broken up and used by lobster fishermen as ballast in their traps. In the 2011 excavations we were able to locate the scattered remains of this burial (Figure 10).

To the Memory
OF
JAMES BARTLET, ESQUIRE
NATIVE OF ABERDEEN
MANY YEARS INHABITANT OF THIS SETTLEMENT
WHO, AFTER HAVING FAITHFULLY DISCHARGED
THE DUTIES OF THE SEVERAL OFFICES
TO WHICH HE WAS CHOSEN, AND EMPLOYED
WITH UNREMITTING ASSIDUITY HIS SUPERIOR
TALENTS TO PROMOTE THE WELFARE
OF THE COMMUNITY
DEPARTED THIS LIFE ON THE 24TH DAY
JANUARY, 1800, IN THE 47TH YEAR
OF HIS AGE.

These slabs were no doubt added quite some time after the initial burial as they were imported and carved in England. The most elaborate of the Phase 3 burials is the spectacular above ground vault of Thomas Potts regarded by many as the father of the Settlement (Figure 5).

The 2011 excavations in the cemetery on St. George's Caye revealed the presence of a previously unknown layer of burials. Based on depth and superposition, these predate the earliest dated burials and probably date to the first half of the 1700s. Although the early Bay Settlement was a remote outpost, the burial types and themes closely parallel those found in England and the American Colonies and reflect the burial traditions of English culture.

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