

The St. George's Caye Archaeology Project: Results of the 2010 Field Season

Edited by
James F. Garber



Texas State University
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Chapter 1. Introduction

James F. Garber

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. 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 (Figure 1.1). Additionally, the caye is crescent shaped making it ideal for careening ships on its leeward side (Figure 1.2).

The Battle of St. George's Caye on September 10, 1798 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 is still plays a large role in Belizean culture, as seen during the annual September Celebrations when people all over the country honor the Battle of St. George's Caye. The fact that the caye is featured on the Belize five-dollar bill is an indicator of its importance (Figure 1.3). The front side depicts a medallion from the tomb of Thomas Potts one of the Bay Settlements early leaders and the back side features a 1764 map of the caye, the Thomas Potts tomb, the Biddle house, and a "bathing crawl".

While much has been written about the history of St. Georges Caye, the first capital of Belize, there has been little archaeology done on the island. With this in mind, we

initiated the St. George's Caye Archaeology Project in 2009. The primary elements of the project are composed of archival research, metal detector survey, subsurface probing, and archaeological excavation . The results of the 2010 field season are presented in the pages that follow.



Figure 1.1. Map of Belize coast showing location of St. George's Caye.



Figure 1.2. Satellite image of St. George's Caye.



Figure 1.3. Belize 5 dollar bill. Front side depicts a medallion from Thomas Potts' tomb, backside shows a 1764 map of the cayes, the Thomas Potts tomb, the Biddle house, and a bathing "crawl". This style bill was introduced in 1990.

Chapter 2. Field Investigations on St. George's Caye: Results of the 2010 Field Season

J. Heath Bentley, James F. Garber, and Lauren A. Sullivan

At the start of the 2010 field season we continued excavations in the cemetery that were initiated in the summer of 2009. Subsequently we expanded our investigations to areas north of the cemetery. All 2010 excavations proved problematic due to a high water table. Because of consistent heavy rainfall, and the fact that the caye is low-lying, the water table remained not far from ground surface throughout the 2010 field season. The water table was reached 20 to 50 cm below ground surface, which varied depending on the level of rainfall. This provided an element of difficulty in the excavations. We developed a method for temporarily lowering the water table in order to more accurately conduct and document excavations. This method included using a gasoline powered bilge pump to remove water from a 1x1 m hole located in proximity to excavation units. When the bilge pump hose pumped water from a lower elevation than the level being excavated, the water table dropped below the excavation level for a large area surrounding the 1x1 m pump hole.

Cemetery Excavations

In the 2009 investigations XU3 was excavated in the back of the cemetery just east of the western cemetery wall (Garber et al. 2010). Because XU3 yielded a high density of artifacts we decided to conduct further excavations in this area. We established a north-south baseline running parallel to the back cemetery wall. This baseline was set 0.5m east of the cemetery west wall. We used this baseline to establish a series of 2010 excavation units along the western cemetery wall which included XU9, XU10, XU11, XU12, and XU14 (Figure 2.1). These units were set up along this line using it as their western boundary. Due

to disturbance from construction of the western cemetery wall, all excavation units established alongside it contained a matrix that consisted of white clay and cement along the western edges. This matrix ran from the southern to the northern boundaries of each unit and continued approximately 20 cm inside of the western boundary.

XU 9 This 2x2 m excavation unit was established directly north of XU3. The purpose of this excavation was to continue investigations of the area along the inside of the western cemetery wall. Level 1 extended from the surface to a depth of 30 cm. The matrix consisted of sand with a high marine shell content throughout the most of the unit. Several small fragments of charred wood were found throughout Level 1. Recovered materials included fragments of brick, mortar, glass, metal, and ceramics.

Level 2 extended from 30-60 cm below surface. The matrix was composed of sand with moderate marine shell content. Whole Queen conch shells were also observed. These shells were most likely deposited by way of storm surge as they are commonly found scattered along the nearby ocean floor. Recovered artifacts included several fragments of glass, ceramics, brick, and mortar. Turtle bone was also recovered in this level. Archival records indicate that turtle meat was an important island resource. A 1764 map indicates the presence of several turtle corrals or “crawls” along the shore (Figure 2.2). A whole rum bottle was also located in this level (Figure 2.3). Excavation of XU9 was terminated approximately 60 cm below ground surface.

XU 10 Level 1 in this 2x2 m unit began at ground surface and extended to roughly 20 cm below surface. The matrix consisted primarily of dark sand. Several bricks were recovered just below the surface. These bricks were not arranged in any significant pattern and were likely deposited by the many storm surges that have passed through the cemetery.

Several fragments of glass and ceramics were recovered. Of particular interest was the recovery of a small Maya ceramic button or line weight. Finding Maya artifacts on St. Georges Caye has thus far been very rare, and we have not found any significant evidence of Maya habitation. This button may have originated elsewhere and brought to St. George's Caye during historic European habitation.

Level 2 extended from 20 cm below surface to a depth of 40 cm. The matrix of Level 2 consisted of sand. Within Level 2, several military related artifacts were recovered including; a lead grapeshot ball, gun mechanism, gambling die, and three buttons (Figure 2.4). Of these buttons one was plain and made of bone. Of the other two one was made of brass, inscribed with the number 2 over which is a crown. The third button was made of pewter and was inscribed with "Duke of York W. Indian Regt." and the Roman numeral "V" in the center indicating that this button was of the 5th West Indian Regiment (Figure 2.4). A low concentration of brick was also found at this level. Various sherds of broken glass, ceramics and metal were also recovered.

Level 3 extended from 40-60 below surface. This level continued below the water table and its matrix consisted of dark sand with a high marine shell content. This level contained a low density of glass and ceramic sherds. Significant artifacts include two pewter military buttons, a rivet, and two obsidian blades. The high concentration of military-related artifacts suggests that this area was a midden associated with military barracks.

Level 4 extended from 60-70 cm below surface. The matrix consisted of a dense sand mixture. It contained very few scattered glass sherds and one copper button. XU10 was terminated approximately 70 cm below ground surface.

XU 11 Level 1 extended from 0-20 cm below surface. The matrix consisted of sand with a high root content resulting from a group of trees immediately to the east of XU11. Level 1 contained a high concentration of brick (whole and fragments) randomly distributed throughout the unit in no significant pattern. A high density of mortar and metal fragments was also present in this level. These bricks no doubt belonged to some of the many burial features that once filled the cemetery which over time were disassembled and scattered by storm surges. Glass and ceramic sherds, as well as fragments of human bone were also present. This level also yielded military-related artifacts which included a gunflint, two pipe bowls, metal buckle, and a metal handle, all serving as further evidence of the existence of military barracks in close proximity to the cemetery.

Level 2 extended from 20-40 cm below surface and contained a matrix that consisted strictly of sand with a high marine shell and tree root content. Artifacts located in this level included glass and ceramic sherds, mortar, brick, and human bone fragments. This level also yielded many military related artifacts including two fragments of musket barrels and a pewter button of to the 5th West Indian Regiment. Other special finds include a silver coin (Spanish Real 1795), glass decanter stopper, copper bolt pin, and a pewter spoon handle. (Figure 2.4)

Level 3 extends about another 20 cm below the bottom of level 2. The matrix of this level was composed of sand with high marine shell content. This level yielded glass and ceramic sherds, as well as fragments of brick and mortar. As further evidence of the presence of a nearby barracks, six metal buttons, a gambling die, fragment of a musket barrel, and gunflint were recovered (Figure 2.4). The musket barrel found at this level was located in the southeast corner of the unit which is the same location in the unit as the two

barrel fragments recovered in Level 2. As we went deeper into this level we began to unearth a concentration of human bone and teeth. 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 (Figure 2.5). Excavations in XU11 were terminated at the depth of the human remains due to the difficulties associated with high water table in this area.

XU 12 Level 1 in this 2x2 m unit extended from 0-20 cm below surface. The matrix consisted of sand with a high content of marine shell and roots. Artifacts included broken glass, whole bricks, brick fragments, pipe bowl fragment, nail, copper gun part, and gunflint.

Level 2 of XU12 extended from 20-40 cm below surface. The matrix was composed of light colored sand. High densities of broken glass, ceramics, metal, and animal bone were recovered. A few whole bricks were found scattered randomly showing no signs of any significant pattern of deposition. Artifacts included a copper gun part, upholstery tack, large button, whole bottle, and a metal button (Figure 2.3).

XU 13 Sub-surface probing in the eastern portion of the cemetery revealed a large obstruction directly east of XU7. Assuming that this obstruction may be associated with the burial chamber excavated in XU7, we decided to establish XU13 around the sub-surface obstruction. XU13 was initiated as a 2x2 m unit extending east from the eastern boundary of XU7. Excavation revealed a large rectangular cement object which we inferred was the lid of the burial monument uncovered in XU7 (Figure 2.6). The lid was not fully included in

XU13 as a portion of it extended outside the eastern boundary. XU13 was extended one half meter east to include the entire cement lid which enlarged the dimensions of the unit to 2.5x2 m.

Level 1 extended from 0-10 cm below surface. The matrix consisted of dark sand. Just below the surface vegetation, human bones were found in the northwest corner of XU13. These bones were not articulated and were most likely deposited by way of storm surge. The burial chamber of XU7 excavated in 2009 was empty. It was assumed that a storm surge and wave action had removed the contents. We suspect that these human remains just below the surface in XU13 were once within the burial chamber of XU7. In addition to the human remains, other artifacts located in this level included a bone button, broken glass, ceramic sherds, and various scraps of metal including a metal ring roughly 6 cm in diameter. Level 1 was terminated when a distinct soil change was reached.

Level 2 began with a change in matrix to white sand with heavy marine shell content. This level included the exposure of the cement feature. Upon excavation, we discovered that this feature was a large cement burial chamber lid, which we believe, belonged to the grave located in XU7 (Figure 2.6). The lid was positioned in the unit as if it had slid off of the burial platform in a storm surge and came to rest to the east of the grave. The construction of the lid was a crude cement mixture containing all sorts of stones and marine shells including a few whole Queen conchs. Photos of the cemetery indicate that several of the brick burial platforms were capped with a cement top upon which was an elaborately inscribed marble slab (Garber et al. 2010). Many of the burial platforms in Yarbrough Cemetery (Belize City) also have these marble slabs but others do not. This platform may have once had a marble slab. According to local informants, marble slabs that had broken up in storms were carried

away and used as ballast in lobster traps. After exposure we flipped the lid over to examine the other side, which we found to be convex with a raised rim around the outside (Figure 2.7). Many broken chunks of cement were located off of the southwest corner and along the north and west edges. These chunks of cement are most likely fragments of the platform lid that broke off during its removal. Measurements of the lid were compared with measurements of the burial chamber of XU7. We found them to be a close match, enough to determine that the lid in XU13 belonged to the burial chamber in XU7.

Level 3 began directly below the cement lid and extended down roughly 20 cm. The matrix consisted of the same sand that was present in Level 2. Off of the south-east corner of the lid, under a large cement fragment there was a concentration of human bone, including a human skull, all on top of a wide horizontally oriented mahogany or Santa Maria plank which likely belonged to a casket (Figure 2.7 upper left in photo). This burial is below and slightly to the south of the base of the XU7 burial chamber. After excavation of Level 3 in the area of XU13 north of the lid, the cement lid was flipped over and rested upside down to expose the matrix below it. In this area we exposed a grave which consisted of an articulated adult human skeleton lying on a wide mahogany or Santa Maria plank oriented east to west with the foot of the plank to the east (Figure 2.7). This plank is the base of a coffin. The remains of a child-sized coffin were found alongside the legs the adult remains inside the adult coffin. Child bones were found in the matrix above this small coffin. The foot of the adult casket extended beyond the eastern boundary of the unit. Outside of the casket the top of a human radius and ulna were found jutting out of the south sidewall of the unit. These bones belonged to yet another burial and were left in place to be examined at a later date, but the remains inside the casket were removed. In the matrix above the casket a metal gate latch

and several metal fence posts with copper finials were recovered (Figure 2.8). An island resident informed us that there was once a small fence in this area marking a grave and that she remembers the fence posts having “gold” tips. These are probably the copper finials. Other artifacts discovered outside of the casket include a pipe bowl with a maker’s mark and a metal button (Figure 2.4). Three other buttons made of shell were found inside the casket with the human remains. The grave, including all human remains were located approximately 80 cm below ground surface.

XU 14 This 2x2 m unit was established in the northern end of the cemetery parallel to the western cemetery wall. The purpose of this unit was to investigate the northwest corner of the cemetery to determine if any evidence of military barracks, such as that found in XU9-12, was present along the northern end of the western cemetery wall.

Level 1 extended from 0-20 cm below surface. The matrix consisted of light brown sand with a high content of marine shell. Artifacts recovered include glass and ceramic sherds, animal bones, fragments of brick and mortar, brass tack, and a pewter button of the 5th West Indian Regiment.

Level 2 extended from 20-40 cm below surface. The matrix was consistent with that found in Level 1. Broken glass and animal bones were found as well as a glass crystal stopper and a stem and base of an Italian latticinio stemware glass (Figure 2.4).

Level 3 extended from 40-60 cm below surface and contained a matrix consistent with that in Levels 1 and 2. Very few artifacts were encountered. The excavations were terminated at a depth of 60 cm below surface.

XU 15 This unit was initiated as a 1x2 m rectangular unit oriented so that its 2 m boundaries ran north to south. XU15 was located between the Battle of St. George’s Caye

monument and the concrete base of a flagpole that once stood in the cemetery (Figure 2.1). This unit was established after examining the graves shown in the 1872 plan map (Figure 2.5). Upon examining the relation of the grave located in XU7 to others on the map we determined that there should be two graves located in this area. The map shows two graves lying side by side. The northernmost grave belongs to Reverend John C. Mongan and the other has no recorded name on the 1872 map. Through sub-surface probing of the area we located a large sub-surface anomaly and positioned XU15 to include it. During excavation the anomaly was uncovered and two 0.5 m extensions were added to the unit in order to include the anomaly's north and south edges. One extension was added off of the southern end and the other was added off of the northern end. After these extensions were added, XU15 was 1x3 m.

Level 1 extended from 0-20 cm below surface. The matrix at this level consisted of light brown sand with a high content of marine shell and tree roots. Recovered material included a small quantity of human bone, glass and ceramic sherds, a metal button and a ceramic pipe. The ceramic pipe, which was nearly complete, was found at the bottom of Level 1 (Figure 2.4).

Level 2 extended from 20-50 cm below surface. Towards the top of Level 2 human long bones were recovered. The matrix remained consistent with that of Level 1. A pewter spoon handle was also found at this level. At the bottom of Level 2, two separate rows of bricks were exposed (Figure 2.9). One row was found in the northern end of the unit, immediately south of the southern boundary of the northern extension. This row of bricks runs from the western wall of XU15 to its eastern wall and is oriented slightly northeast-to-southwest. The other row of bricks is located in the northwest corner of the southern extension of XU15.

This row contains four bricks and runs parallel to the row of bricks in the northern area of the unit. This southern row begins at the western wall of the unit and ends 30 cm shy of the eastern wall of XU15. One brick was found alone and out of position, south of the midway point of the northern wall. Along with this brick were two human long bones and a fragment of a human cranium. In the northern extension, outside of the row of bricks and at the bottom of Level 2, several human bones were found along with what appears to be a coffin tack embedded in a small piece of mahogany or Santa Maria wood. We believe that these bones are either associated with an earlier burial or were displaced from the burial chamber in XU15. A clay marble was found in the northern extension of this level.

Level 3 consisted of the excavation of matrix to expose two flat layers of brick lying side-by-side. These layers of brick are oriented east-to-west and lay directly underneath the rows uncovered in Level 2. We concluded that these two layers of brick are the remains of the bottoms of the two burial chambers recorded in this location on the 1872 cemetery map. The northern burial consists of a single layer of brick extending from the southern boundary of the northern extension to the north-south midpoint of XU15. The northernmost row of bricks excavated in Level 2 rests on top of the burial chamber floor and runs along its northern edge. The southern edge of the northern burial does not have a row of brick on top of the floor, as does the northern edge. As for the southern burial, it consists of a flat layer of brick extending from the southern edge of the northern burial to the northern boundary of the southern extension. Two stacked courses of brick oriented east-to-west, and extending from the east unit boundary to the west, were uncovered and found on top of the northern edge of the southern burial. The southern row of brick excavated in level 2 was found to rest on top of another row of brick. These two stacked courses rested on top of the southern edge of the

southern burial chamber floor. The southern burial lies approximately 20 cm lower than the northern one. All bricks in both graves run east-to-west in straight rows. We believe that the rows of brick running on top of the edges of the floors must be the remains of the burial chamber walls. Considering that the southern grave is lower, and that the northern grave does not have a southern sidewall we believe that the southern grave may pre-date the northern grave and that during construction the northern grave was built off of the southern grave. These graves were highly disturbed by storm surge and no remains of the lids were found. Disarticulated human remains were found above both grave floors as well as outside of the southern edge of the southern grave. Three metal buttons were found above the northern grave. The surface of the northern burial floor was located approximately 52 cm below ground surface and the southern burial floor was located approximately 70 cm below surface.

Level 4 consisted of the removal of two rows of brick from the bottom of the northern grave and excavation approximately 40 cm below the burial chamber floor. The purpose of this level was to investigate the area beneath the grave to determine if there were any human remains below it. We conducted the excavation of Level 4 in order to conclude that the bottom layers of bricks were in fact the bottoms of the graves and not the top. This was necessary because no remains of the top of either grave were found. We recovered one human phalanx and small fragments of metal. Due to the sparse finds we concluded that the bottom layers of bricks were in fact the bottoms of the graves.

Fuzy Property

The Fuzy property is a lot that lies immediately north of the cemetery. We continued our strategy of excavating along our north-south baseline and opened two 1x1 m test

excavation units using this line as their western boundary. These two excavation units are XU16 and XU17. The elevations of most, if not all, of the property lots on the caye have been raised by infilling with dredged sand. During excavation in areas outside of the cemetery this dredged fill has been the first level encountered and is composed white sand with high marine shell content.

XU 16 This unit was placed 5 m north of the cemetery wall. Level 1 extended from the surface to a depth of approximately 30 cm and ended when a distinct soil change was encountered. The matrix consisted of white sand with a high marine shell content. Artifacts at this level were sparse and included only modern refuse.

Level 2 began with a matrix change composed of dark sand. Artifacts included broken ceramics and glass and a high density of turtle bone towards the bottom of the level. Level 2 fill also contained carbon flecks that were scattered throughout the level. XU16 was terminated with the end of Level 2 at a depth of 80 cm below ground surface.

XU 17 This unit was established to the north of XU16. Level 1 extended from 0-40 cm. It contained three Queen conch shells, animal bone, bottle base, broken ceramics and a piece of melted glass. A soil change was encountered at 40cm below surface which marks the bottom of Level 1.

Level 2 began below the fill sand and continued for an additional 50 cm. The matrix consisted of dark sand with low marine shell content. Glass and ceramic sherds, metal fragments, a pipe stem, and animal bone were found towards the top of this level. Towards the bottom of the level artifacts became very scarce. Level 2 was terminated at a depth of approximately 95 cm below ground surface.

Hunt Property

The Hunt property is adjacent to the north end of the Fuzy property. At the Hunt property, there was a row of brick partially exposed above the ground surface. Subsurface probing revealed a large solid structure. The Hunts informed us that there was once a water vat on the property that rested on a large brick platform in the location of this exposed row of bricks. This water vat was knocked off of the platform during the hurricane of 1931. According to the Hunts, this was the water vat where the young girl was killed that became the island's Grey Lady Ghost (see Chapter 3).

XU 18 This began as a 2x2 m excavation unit, but as the platform was cleared it became evident that it needed to be expanded in order to include the feature in its entirety. Two 2.5 m expansions were added to this unit, one to the east and one to the south, expanding its dimensions to 4.5x4.5 m.

Level 1 began at ground surface and included all contents down to the platform surface. The matrix above the platform consisted of a mixture of muck, marine shell, and clay. Several small concentrations of burnt wood were found throughout, as well as a high concentration of modern refuse distributed throughout the level. Excavations exposed the brick platform, revealing it to be a six-sided structure with three small tiers of brick at its base (Figure 2.10). The platform has six internal brick spokes running from each corner to the center, and has symmetrical sides and angles. Each spoke consisted of two levels, the bottom level being 32 cm wide and the top 20 cm wide rising 14 cm above the bottom layer. The hexagonal platform was found positioned in the unit at an angle with the north end as its highest point, sloping downward to the south. At its lowest point the platform is 86 cm

below ground surface. From corner to corner the structure measures 3.14 m. This brick platform was found to be fully intact except for a few cracked and broken bricks.

DeShield Property

The DeShield property lies on the north end of the island in an area known as Fisherman Town. The DeShield property is an uninhabited, undeveloped lot full of vegetation. Two 1x1 m test excavation units, XU19 and XU20 were established. XU19 was placed at the north end of the lot and XU20 at the south. The matrix of both units consisted of crushed marine shell fill. Excavations in XU19 and XU20 continued for approximately 60 cm below ground surface and produced no artifacts. Excavations in both units were terminated at a depth of 60 cm below surface.

MacPherson Property

Our final test excavation during the 2010 field season occurred on the MacPherson property, a residential lot along the east coast of the island. A 1x1 m excavation unit, XU21, was established towards the back or west end of the property. XU21 had a matrix that consisted of thick gray clay that ended 16 cm below ground surface where a soil change occurred. The matrix change consisted of dark sand and continued for 5 cm, after which the matrix returned to the gray clay. XU21 failed to produce artifacts or anything of cultural significance. Excavations were terminated at a depth of 50 cm below ground surface.

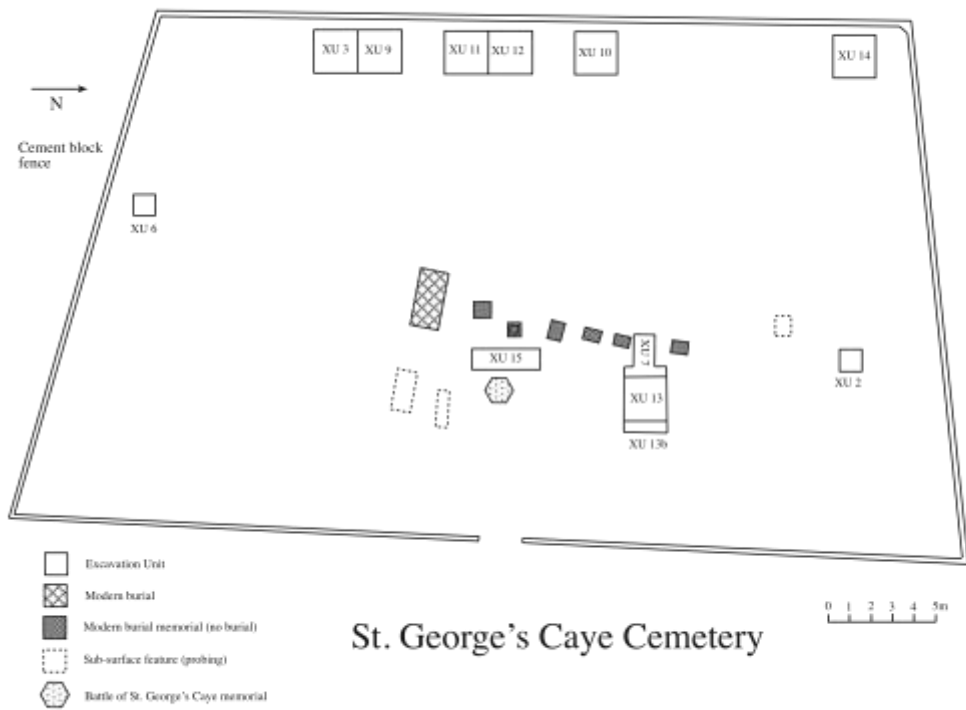


Figure 2.1. Plan map of St. George's Caye Cemetery showing locations of excavation units (XU) and surface features.

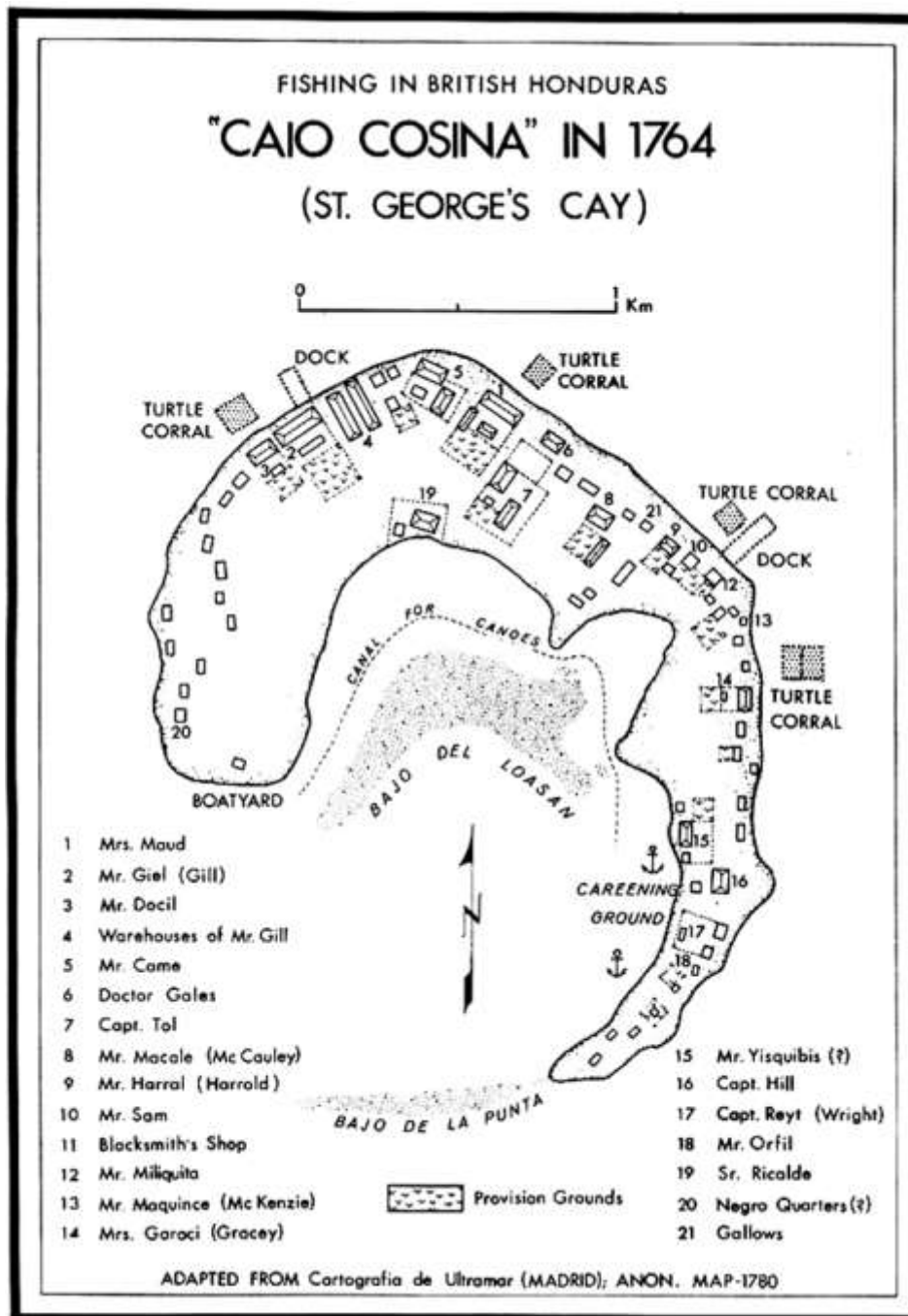


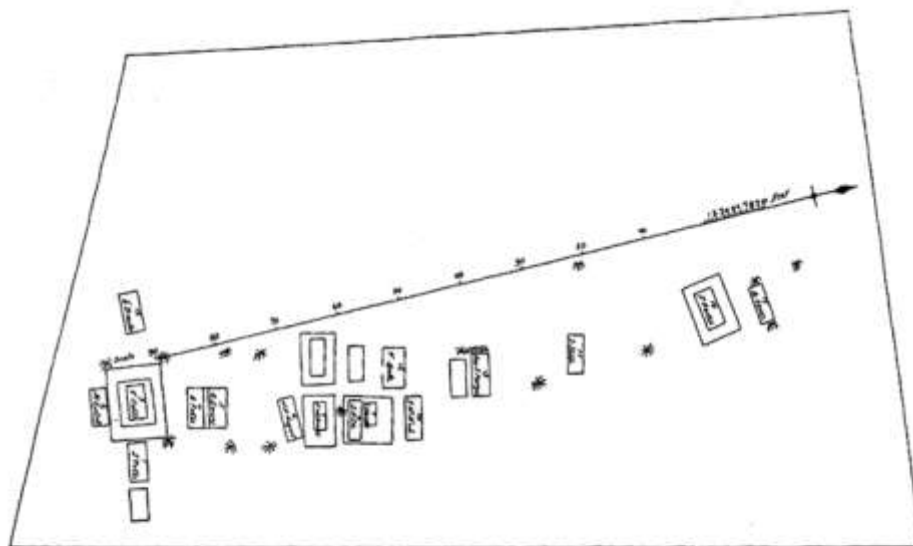
Figure 2.2. 1764 map of St. George's Caye. From Craig 1966.



Figure 2.3. Dark glass bottles: XU9, XU12.



Figure 2.4. Artifacts from St. George's Caye: a) brass button; b) pewter button of the 5th West Indian Regiment; c) flint lock gun hammer; d) glass decanter stoppers; e) gambling die; f) clay tobacco pipes.



*A Plan
of
The Cemetery at Saint Georges Caye,
surveyed and Drawn on a scale of 500 feet to an Inch, by
Rob Hume, Surveyor General
August 29th 1872.*

Figure 2.5. 1872 plan map of St. George's Caye Cemetery by Rob Hume.



Figure 2.6. XU13 in St. George's Caye cemetery. The burial chamber in the top of the photo is in XU7 and was found empty. The cement feature in the center of the photo was probably once a part of that chamber and removed by a hurricane storm surge.



Figure 2.7. XU13 in St. George's Caye cemetery. Mahogany or Santa Maria wood coffin in lower left. The partial remains of a child-sized coffin can be seen in the lower right of this coffin. An additional wood coffin is in upper left of the photo. It is underneath and to the south and east of the burial chamber of XU7 (top edge of photo). These remains were below the water table. The hose in the upper right of the photo is for a gasoline powered bilge pump to remove water during excavation.



Figure 2.8. Fence posts and gate latch pieces from XU 13, St. George's Caye Cemetery. Finials of the posts are made of copper.



Figure 2.9. XU15 in St. George's Caye cemetery. The brick layers are the bottoms of burial chambers. These burials are recorded on the 1872 map of the cemetery (Figure 2.5).



Figure 2.10. Brick water vat foundation, XU18.

Chapter 3. Archaeology and the “Grey Lady” Ghost of St. George’s Caye

James F. Garber and Lauren A. Sullivan

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. 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.

Version 1

Several internet web sites (Moon Belize Travel Guide, Belize Trip Advisor, Caribbean Property Magazine) tell a version of the Grey Lady ghost story that involves the famous 18th century English pirate Sir Henry Morgan (Figure 3.1). 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.

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, 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 3.2). 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 3.3). There is a website that sells dolls of beheaded famous historical figures including Lady Jane Grey (Figure 3.4). 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.

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 3.5). 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 3.6). 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 the houses on the caye were of wood and could not provide adequate shelter in a hurricane. 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. When the front side of the storm passed, they tried to free “Jim” from the debris to no avail while in the eye or calm of the storm. When the backside of the storm hit, “Jim” drowned. 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.

The Archaeology

While conducting a pedestrian survey of the island, we encountered a row of mortared bricks angled in the ground (Figure 3.7). 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 3.7 is all of the feature that Mr. Hunt had ever 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 but the deepest part of the feature (Figure 3.8). 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 (Figure 3.9) 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 3.10). The information on the stone confirms many elements of the story.

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.



Figure 3.1. Popular 18th century woodcut of Sir Henry Morgan.



Figure 3.2. Lady Jane Grey, the “Nine Days Queen” of England.



Figure 3.3. Beheading of Lady Jane Grey.



Figure 3.4. Headless Lady Jane Grey dolls.



Figure 3.5. Photo of Heloise "Jim" Masson (center in dark suit) ca. 1925. Photo courtesy of Van Bibber family photo collection.



Figure 3.6. Photo of Jim Masson, WWI soldier killed in Europe. Photo courtesy of Masson family.



Figure 3.7. Surface photo -bricks of the water vat foundation.



Figure 3.8. Excavation of the water vat foundation.



Figure 3.9. Brick sugar mill at Indian Church. Note brick mini-steps at base similar to those along the base of the water vat in Figure 3.8.



Figure 3.10. Gravestone of “Jim” Masson, Lords Ridge Cemetery, Belize City.