

IN: *Proceedings of the XVIII International Congress for Caribbean Archaeology, Grenada, WI, 1999*. Tome I, pp. 329-335.

DIGGING AT THE GRAVE OF THE ENGLISHMAN@: A PRELIMINARY  
REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT A FORMER BRITISH NAVY HOSPITAL  
CEMETERY, ENGLISH HARBOUR, ANTIGUA, WI

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This paper is a preliminary report on excavations at a cemetery associated with the site of a British Naval hospital, English Harbour, Antigua. Historical records indicate that the hospital was open from A.D. 1793-1822, and may have provided care not only to military and naval personnel, but also to the general public and slaves.

Some portions of the site have been subjected to considerable disturbance as the area has been developed as a residential neighbourhood, but some ruins and remnants of grave markers are still evident. These few structures and the graves they overlie are increasingly threatened by encroaching development. Mitigation of the cemetery began in 1997, and continues as a multi-year project. This paper will discuss the analyses of the human remains, and integrate these findings with information from historical sources in order to provide a clearer picture of life and health in colonial Antigua circa A.D. 1800.

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Ce papier est un rapport préliminaire sur les fouilles a un cimetière associé avec le site d'un hôpital de marine Anglaise, English Harbour, Antigua. Le archives historiques indique que l'hôpital était ouvert de A.D. 1793-1822, et fournissait peut-être de l'attention aux personnel militaire et naval aussi aux publique et les esclaves.

Quelque partis du site ont été sounitent a beaucoup de pertubations puis que la région a été developper comme quartier résidentiel, mais quelques ruines et restiges de marqueurs de tombes sont encore évident. Les quelques structures et les tombes qu=elles couvert sont de plus en plus menacer par le développement. L=atténuation du cimetière était commencé en 1997, et continue comme un project de plusieurs années. Ce papier va discuter l=analyse des restes osteologiques et va intégré ces résultants avec l=information des sources historiques pour obtenir éclairir le portrait de la vie et la santé en l>Antigua coloniale.

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Este artículo es un informe preliminar de las excavaciones de un cementerio asociado al sitio del hospital Naval de la armada Británica, en el muelle inglés, Antigua. Los registros históricos indican que este hospital estuvo abierto entre 1793-1822 D.C., y que pudo proveer sus servicios no solamente al personal militar y naval sino al público en general, así como a los esclavos.

Algunos sectores del sitio han estado sometidos a una considerable alteración, dado que en el área se ha desarrollado un sector residencial, aún que algunas ruinas, así como algunos marcadores de sepulcros todavía son evidentes. Estas pocas estructuras y las tumbas que revelan se encuentran bajo un peligro constante de destrucción dado el desarrollo urbano. Las labores de mitigación del cementerio se iniciaron en 1997, y se continúan como parte de un proyecto a varios años. En este escrito discutimos los análisis de los restos humanos, e integramos estos resultados con información histórica para producir una imagen clara de la vida y la salud en la Antigua Colonial hacia 1800 D.C.

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This paper is a preliminary report on recent excavations at a cemetery site associated with a former British Naval hospital at English Harbour, Antigua. Historic records indicate that the hospital was in use from A.D. 1793-1822 during the Napoleonic Wars, which was a period of intensive usage of the nearby Nelson's Dockyard. The Dockyard served as Britain's main station for the refitting and sheltering of ships in the Lesser Antilles.

The site (PAH-83) is located on a hill overlooking English Harbour to the North. The entire area that the hospital and cemetery are thought to have occupied is now a residential neighbourhood. Because of this development, large portions of the cemetery have been subject to considerable disturbance. Local residents have pointed out areas where such disturbance has destroyed ruins of associated structures, grave markers and graves over the past few decades. Development is continuing in this area, and the undisturbed portions of the site are in imminent danger of destruction.

The goal of our project is to mitigate the undisturbed areas of the cemetery site in order to obtain as much archaeological information as possible about the British Navy at English Harbour during the Napoleonic Wars. We are particularly interested in health and lifestyle related issues.

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Historic records for every day life during this period are incomplete, and those pertaining to the hospital are particularly sparse. The available documents have not originated directly from the hospital but have been gleaned from a variety of sources such as parish baptismal records, official Navy correspondence and reports, and newspaper advertisements (Nicholson 1993). The integration of these records with the archaeological material will provide us with a clearer understanding of life at English Harbour circa A.D. 1800. After completion of our study, the human remains excavated from this site will be reinterred at a cemetery site such as one of the military cemeteries that are under the protection of the National Parks Authority.

The site was the subject of two small-scale investigations before the present activities. In 1980, salvage excavations were conducted on a midden associated with the Naval hospital that was discovered during construction activities (Nicholson 1993). And in 1997, a University of Calgary (UC) archaeological field school directed by Reg Murphy, conducted some test excavations in the area. A single grave was located and subsequently excavated.

In the summer of 1998, mitigation of the cemetery commenced on a larger scale, again in conjunction with a UC field school. Since ownership

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of the site is now broken up into numerous private residential properties, all of our activities required the permission and patience of the residents as we worked in their yards in close proximity to their homes. The residents of the community warmly received our activities, and several youths took an active interest in the project as volunteers.

We began excavation in a cleared yard a few meters to the north of the 1997 excavations where the remains of four grave-marker foundations were clearly visible at the ground surface. These foundations were oriented in a single row. The structures probably once provided the bases of more elaborate structures that were similar to those found at other contemporaneous cemeteries on the island. A single grave marker was still in place over the southern-most foundation up until a few years ago. It was salvaged by the Dockyard Museum in order to preserve the only known engraved marker associated with this cemetery. The marker gives the name of an assistant ship=s surgeon named Alexander Bernard who served on the *H.M.S. Pyramus*, and states that he died at the age of 27 years in October of 1821 (Nicholson 1993). This grave has not yet been excavated due to its close proximity to a road, but represents a valuable resource to the project since the individual is of known identity, age-at-death, and occupation.

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However, the three other graves at this location were completely excavated. During the course of that excavation, several unmarked grave shafts were also discovered. The graves were situated along two rows running roughly North-South, and the heads of the interred individuals were at the west ends of the graves.

The few surviving records that pertain to the hospital indicate that it was in operation for 30 years (Nicholson 1993). Although we have excavated only a very small portion of the associated cemetery, it is already evident that it was intensively used. The two rows of graves we excavated are overlapping upon each other, causing the disturbance of the head or west end of one row. In total, 7 graves were excavated in the 1998 season, and found to contain the skeletal remains of 10 individuals. Three additional graveshafts were located but not excavated, including that of the surgeon. Two of the grave shafts excavated (burials 8 and 9) contained more than one individual that had been interred at different times as was evident by the disturbance of the lowermost individuals. Numerous isolated human bones and coffin nails were found in the fill of some of the grave shafts providing more evidence of disturbance due to the digging of new graves.

In addition, two unmarked grave shafts (burials 4 and 7) were found in

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the space between two of the marked graves. Burial 7 was a very small, shallow shaft and was found to be empty upon excavation. However, the remains of an infant (burial 4b) were found scattered in the fill of the adjacent grave (burial 4a) and it is likely that these disturbed remains once occupied the small empty grave shaft. The pattern of disturbance indicates that the individuals in the marked graves were interred earlier than the other burials. Modern disturbance also had an effect on preservation, as half of two of the graves (burials 8 and 9) had been obliterated by the recent construction of a septic tank.

All individuals had been interred in six-sided wooden coffins that were widest at the shoulder. The coffins were very poorly preserved and generally only evident as soil stains and nails. The preservation of the human remains was generally good, and would have been excellent if not for the intruding roots of a large Neem tree near the toe end of the graves.

To date, the human remains excavated from PAH-83 represent 11 individuals. Osteological analysis was conducted using the methods outlined in Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994). However, due to destruction by recent construction activity, determination of sex and race could be performed on only 5 of the individuals. With the exception of the newborn infant, all individuals were males ranging in age from the late teens to over

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sixty years, with a cluster of individuals at the younger end of this range.

Assessment of non-metric cranial characteristics to determine ancestry followed criteria in Gill (1986) and Rhine (1990). Three individuals exhibited Caucasian features and two individuals exhibited Black features. All of the individuals (burials 3, 5 and 6) interred under the three large grave marker foundations exhibited Caucasian features and they range in age from about 17 to 35 years. The two individuals (burials 1 and 4a) exhibiting Black features were males aged 40-45 years and 60+ years, the latter representing the oldest individual found.

The finding of a sample of mixed racial ancestry in the cemetery was expected given the population composition of the Dockyard laborers, and of Antigua in general. Africans and African-Caribbeans outnumbered Whites in Antigua, as in the other Leeward Islands, by approximately 7 to 1 by the mid-eighteenth century (Buckley 1998:43). Similarly, by 1780, the Dockyard workforce was composed of 70% African/African-Caribbean labourers who were mainly owned by the Navy (Nicholson 1991:7). In addition to the Navy's slaves, there were slaves lent out for labour to the Navy and Military by the local planters. Also, there were free African/African-Caribbean individuals present although in relatively small numbers (Buckley 1998, Nicholson 1991:8).

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Due to poor preservation, the remaining 5 individuals could not be analyzed with respect to sex or ancestry, and they represent a newborn, a 14-15 year old adolescent and 3 probable adults. With the exception of the newborn, all of the individuals found in the cemetery fit the profile of Naval personnel. They are all males over the age of 14 years, although it was common for boys of younger ages to be in army or naval service (Buckley 1998:124-127; Pope 1981: 64).

The presence of a newborn infant in the cemetery is not surprising. Civilian populations that served various support functions, and included women, have accompanied most military campaigns in history. Other archaeological investigations have also found women and children interred in cemeteries associated with military facilities contemporaneous with PAH-83 (eg. Liston and Baker 1996). Permanent facilities such as the Dockyard would almost certainly have had a sizable population of affiliated women and children. While generally only British Army officers were permitted to have their families accompany them on campaign, companion women were not uncommon on Naval ships and shore facilities. The Naval authorities simply overlooked such infringements upon official policies (Lavery 1994:141; Pope 1981:171-175). Women also served as nurses at Naval shore hospitals until the mid-1800s (Lloyd and Coulter 1963). And although

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the majority of slaves working for the Navy and Army were male, women and children also served in various capacities (Buckley 1998).

The age and racial profile of the cemetery, while representing only a very small sample, suggests that the hospital clientele may have included the entire Dockyard population. In addition, there are also indications in the historical record that treatment at the Naval Hospital at English Harbour was not limited to Naval personnel, but also extended to the Navy's dependant and support populations. In 1815, the hospital chaplain baptized an infant slave named Mary, the daughter of a woman belonging to the wife of the Hospital watchman (Baptism Records, St. Phillips Church, Antigua, WI). A local newspaper advertisement from 1819 refers to the hospital at English Harbour as the General Detachment Hospital and states that Robert Hartle, Surgeon, would inoculate persons there (*Antigua Gazette*, 28 January 1819). The advertisement may refer to inoculation of the public as well as Naval personnel and support personnel. And finally, the last known hospital record states that Tom Spanker, a sailmaker and slave that worked in the Dockyard, died at the hospital in 1822 (correspondence from Admirals Cochrane and Hood to the Antigua Yard Commissioner, Antigua Navy Yard Correspondence IV, 17 October 1822).

The salvage excavation of the midden in 1980 has also yielded clues

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to the identity of the Hospital's clientele (Nicholson 1993). Buttons from the uniforms of naval officers and army regiments from both the British and French Armies were found in the midden suggesting that the Naval hospital served the Army and prisoners of war. In addition, a shaker (large cap) badge bearing the insignia of the 8<sup>th</sup> West India Regiment was found suggesting the presence of African/African-Caribbean troops at the hospital (Nicholson 1993). This regiment was one of a dozen comprised mainly of African slaves that were promised their freedom in exchange for 5 years of military service (Buckley 1979:26-27). Since Army personnel appear to have been treated at the hospital, it is also plausible that their dependants may have been treated there.

Many artifacts related to the hospital were found at the midden site, but aside from the odd ceramic fragment found in the grave fill, there were few items found at the cemetery. The burials themselves also contained very few artifacts. The individual in burial 1 was covered with the remains of a cloth shroud, and his feet had been tied together with rope. Only this individual shows obvious signs of preparation for burial aside from placement in a coffin. Three other individuals (burials 4, 5 and 6) showed evidence of being interred in clothing. Two of the individuals (burials 4 and 6) had round bone buttons overlying the pelvic bones in a configuration

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similar to that on the style of trousers favoured by many sailors (Haythornwaite and Younghusband 1993). The individual in burial 4 also had three small shell buttons on the mid-thorax and wrist which were probably shirt buttons. The individual in burial 5 had no buttons, but a copper alloy belt buckle was found on his abdominal region. A second copper alloy artifact was also found in this burial B a large nail from the head end of the coffin that bears the ADevil=s Claw@ or arrow shaped mark (the government arrow) that in this case no doubt indicates Royal Navy property (Nicholson 1993).

Historical accounts of the Caribbean military campaigns cite very high rates of illness and death from infectious diseases (eg. Buckley 1978, 1998; Duffy 1987). In fact, few military or naval personnel on campaign in the Caribbean were wounded or killed in action. Instead, the troops suffered from a variety of infectious diseases including yellow fever, malaria, dengue, dysentery, typhoid, smallpox, leg ulcers and other unidentifiable fevers that were exacerbated by poor nutrition and excessive alcohol consumption (Buckley 1978). Pope (1981:133) cites a quote from one Dr. William Turnbull, who asserted in 1806 that the West Indies stations, although second in importance only to those of the English Channel, were >avowedly the most unhealthy=. English Harbour was particularly

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notorious at this time for being an unhealthy place, and it was known as a Grave of Englishmen (Nicholson 1993). At the time, the West Indies garrison as a whole shared this reputation as being a death sentence to British servicemen (Buckley 1998; Duffy 1987:326). It had one of the highest mortality rates from disease in the British Empire (Buckley 1978, 1998; Duffy 1987).

Despite this reputation, the human remains found at the cemetery exhibit very little evidence of infectious disease. However, these findings are not completely surprising given that the majority of diseases that people were suffering from in the West Indies were short-term, rapid ailments that would not have affected an individual long enough to induce changes in the skeleton prior to death. Typically, a minimum of two to three weeks is required for a bony response to be induced since the generation of bone tissue is a relatively slow process.

The pathological conditions that are common in the skeletal remains from this site relate to traumatic events. Four of the eleven individuals (36% - burials 1, 3, 4a and 6) exhibit healed fractures of various bones. All of the fractures are typical of those that could be sustained in day-to-day life, and are well healed without any evidence of complications. Healed fractures of the hand were present in two individuals (burials 4a and

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6) leading to speculation over the historical stereotype of brawling sailors. Two individuals (burials 1 and 4a) also had patterns of fractures that were probably suffered during a fall. The individual from burial 4a had healed fractures of the right clavicle (collarbone), many of the right ribs, and the left hand. Some of the ribs were broken in two places suggesting that he fell onto his side impacting his ribs on a structure or object. The broken clavicle and hand suggest that he tried to break his fall with an outstretched arm. Although the fractures healed in badly misaligned positions, the individual shows little sign of significant disability in terms of atrophy or asymmetry of the arm bones.

Other evidence of trauma is evident in lesions indicative of the accumulated effects of hard physical labour. Two individuals (burials 3 and 6) exhibit lesions on their vertebrae known as Schmorl's nodes. These lesions are due to excessive strain on the back, such as that associated with heavy lifting and carrying, causing herniation of the discs between the vertebral bones (Ortner and Puschtar 1981:430-432). One of the younger individuals (burial 5) also exhibits cortical defects at the site of muscle attachments that stabilize the shoulder indicating excessive physical activity (Owsley *et al.* 1991). Arthritic lesions are evident in the older individuals (burials 1, 3 and 4a) but the lesions are not excessive or patterned in such

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a way that cannot be attributable to age.

Amputations were a common medical treatment for wounds due to severe trauma or infection (Pope 1981:145). An isolated femur midshaft fragment found in the fill of burial 5 bore distinct cutmarks indicative of a saw, and no doubt represents an amputation. Unfortunately, the fragment was short and found in a disturbed context so it is not known whether it came from a discrete grave or not. Hospitals often had a pit where amputated limbs were buried, but if the patient died very soon after the amputation, the limbs might be buried with their body.

In coming years, we plan to continue with the field school and our investigations at the cemetery, as well as expanding to explore other areas of the hospital site. We will map the area comprehensively, and conduct further excavation of the associated middens. Our primary interests are in quality of life, including health and medical care, at the Dockyard. In addition to gross morphological analyses of the human remains, we will attempt to address questions of diet and health by conducting chemical analyses on small bone samples.

In historical analyses of the era, excessive alcohol consumption and lead poisoning are attributed to exasperating the poor health of the troops and sailors in the West Indies (Buckley 1978, 1998). Sources of lead were

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abundant in the everyday life of the Navy at the Dockyard - not only was rum distilled with lead equipment, but water collection and storage equipment, and even eating utensils were often made from lead. We will test the level of lead contamination in the human remains in order to obtain quantitative information that can be compared to modern clinical data in order to determine the level of lead poisoning and its effects on the health of the individuals buried at the site (Lalich and Aufderheide 1991).

We are also interested in exploring the range of clientele that the Naval hospital served. Continued excavation will yield a more comprehensive sample in terms of age, sex and ancestry. Stable isotope and trace element analysis of human remains may facilitate the determination of the geographic origin of each of the individuals. These analyses are based on the fact that hard tissues of the body will retain isotopic and elemental signatures that reflect the foodstuffs they ate and the geology of the geographic area they lived in (for a recent review see Katzenberg and Harrison 1997). Since dental tissues reflect childhood diet and residence while bone tissues reflect the last 5-10 years of life it is often possible to trace movements of people to new geographic areas (eg. Sealy *et al.* 1995). Our analysis will focus on stable isotopes of carbon, nitrogen and strontium, as well as elemental strontium/calcium ratios. This data will

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be a valuable for those individuals that are not well preserved enough for determination of ancestry, as well as providing an additional piece of information for those individuals for which such assessments were possible based on morphological criteria.

At this time, we are not aware of similar projects in the Caribbean region, and as such, this project represents a valuable source of information into life during the Napoleonic Wars at a Naval facility. In the larger picture, very few skeletal samples from military or naval contexts in the New World have been available for study, and so this project will contribute to the larger base of knowledge of life and health during this period.

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