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Grave Site Identification on St. John, Virgin Islands: The Use of Grave Markers and Commemorative Space during the Danish Colonial Period

By Helen Blouet*

The history of St. John is riddled with hierarchical divisions which reflected a well-defined class system (Figure 1). From 1718 to 1917, Danish and other European colonists developed plantation economies and maritime trade, both shaped by slave labor and social hierarchies that created inequalities among enslaved Africans, free white Europeans, and freed people of color (Dookhan 1974; Hall 1992). These disparities influenced a person's life and death. For example, burials of the enslaved were not often allowed in church cemeteries reserved for European colonists. Such separations caused people of African descent to create meaningful burial sites within their communities. This paper focuses on how people with varying degrees of power interacted with landscapes and material objects to create meaningful commemorative practices in plantation societies. On St. John and throughout the Caribbean and the world, cemeteries are important sites that contribute to a sense of belonging, heritage, and land ownership for the people who live and lived there (Aries 1974; Besson 2002; Brown 2006; Lenik 2004; Mytum 2004; Olwig 1985, 1994). Here I present how a selection of the Afro- and Euro-Caribbean peoples created, maintained, and changed burial practices and cemeteries within hierarchical racist, classist, and religious structures and landscapes. They used a variety of locations to commemorate the dead. The first cemeteries I present relate to a Danish landowning family. The second example is the cemetery of an early nineteenth century merchant and estate owner who moved from St. Thomas. These examples are followed by burial sites and cemeteries used by enslaved laborers and free people of color.

This paper is adapted from my larger research project that uses archaeological survey, documentary analysis, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) applications to interpret how social constructs of race, class, and religion impacted the creation, location, and use of memorials and grave sites (Figure 2). Unfortunately, several historic burial sites
on St. John are not maintained and protected and many have been forgotten as families pass away, move off-island, or no longer wish to look after them. Furthermore, cemetery practices have changed and few people are buried in traditional plots on family land, without following proper legal codes (Department of Public Works, Virgin Islands Code, Title 19, 2008). Instead, municipal and church cemeteries are the preferred and legal places for burial.

Burials by Status

Burials for a Danish Landowning Family

In the past, without the use of today's embalming practices, where ever burial took place, it had to be done soon after a person's death, regardless of race, class, or religion. Otherwise, the corpse would rapidly decay in the hot, tropical environment. Bodies were usually buried in the 24 hours that followed a person's death. Wealthy and poor individuals alike, free and enslaved, were buried in a number of locations, including family plots near dwellings or in some form of community cemetery. For example, the Hjardemaals, a well-to-do Danish family who owned Cinnamon Bay plantation in the early 19th century, maintained a family cemetery on a hill top just south of their home. Two tombs stand in the foreground and a row of five nameless tombs stand behind them. (Figures 3 & 4) One of the two tombs in the front bears an inscription for Mrs. Anna Margarethe Berner Hjardemaal, who passed away in 1836 (Figure 5a, 5b). It is believed that the nameless tomb beside her was intended for the body of her husband when he passed. However, Mr. Hjardemaal died in 1845 and was actually buried in the 'Danish' cemetery in the town of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas, a short boat ride from St. John. The 'Danish' cemetery was reserved for prominent Danish and Lutheran colonists (Figure 6a, 6b). Here, Mr. Hjardemaal has a tomb made of red brick and marble that bears a unique inscription (Figure 7). Some of his children are also buried with him. It is evident here that the wealthy landowning Hjardemaal family utilized different but significant burial sites for family members. One location was the family cemetery on Cinnamon Bay Estate, and the other was an elite cemetery reserved for Danish families.

Possible Commoner Burials on an Estate

Colonists with less authority or power, including enslaved laborers, were also buried in a variety of places. At the Leinster Bay estate, for example, an estate cemetery lies on a ridge overlooking Leinster Bay and an abandoned sugar factory (Figure 8). Six graves lie in a rough line going up the hill. They vary in design, quality, and preservation. The grave closest to the bottom of the ridge belongs to James E. Murphy (Figure 9), a land owner who came from St. Thomas in the 19th century and soon became prosperous on St. John. His grave on the ridge is marked by a brick and stone rectangular vault and enclosed by a brick wall (Figure 10a, 10b). His name and date of death in 1809 is inscribed on a marble slab, although the date is incorrect and he actually passed away in 1808 (Figure 11) (Knight 2001).
At the top of the ridge lie a few grave markers in different states of preservation. The one pictured in Figure 12 is a brick rectangular vault with no name or wall surrounding it. The remaining graves in the area are marked by nameless brick vaults and piles of brick and stone. These could mark the burials of family members, overseers, servants, or even favored slaves who lived or worked on the property. It is possible that the placement of these burials with that of James Murphy's was meant to reflect a familial or working relationship between people with different quality burial markers and potentially different social statuses. Furthermore, the cemetery at Leinster Bay reflects an association between the deceased who lived there and the land they owned and worked.

**Burials for the Enslaved and Free People of Color**

Burial sites for enslaved laborers have been identified throughout the Caribbean, including the following locations on St. John. Burials at Adrian Estate were discovered during excavations by Elizabeth Kellar (2003) in the completion of her dissertation research. The burials were encountered under what used to be house floors and gardens of dwellings for the enslaved who lived on the estate. At Lameshur Estate along the beach (Figure 13), unmarked burials near a few tamarind trees were discovered by the National Park Service during the construction of a bathroom stall. According to the skeletal, artifactual, and documentary evidence noted by Ken Wild in 1989, these burials may have been for enslaved or free laborers (Wild 1989).

A burial ground at Cinnamon Bay beach has been identified through documentary analysis and through the discovery of skeletal remains occasionally washing out of the sands during rough wave activity and intense storms. Freed laborers who fell victim to the cholera epidemic in the 1850s were buried here according to documentation (Ivinson 1854), and given the higher than expected amount of human remains that have washed out thus far, National Park archaeologist Ken Wild believes it is possible that enslaved laborers were buried here prior to 1848 (Ken Wild, personal communication, June 2004).

Other sites that may contain formerly enslaved laborers are possible cemeteries at Bordeaux Mountain and L'Esperance. It has been reported by local archaeologists and historians that on occasion, human skeletal remains have washed out of the banks and ridges at these sites (David Knight and Ken Wild, personal communication, June 2004). At Bordeaux (Figure 14), conch shells, piles of stone, and a huge kapok, or silk cotton tree, are present. These objects are thought to be characteristic of grave markers for enslaved and free inhabitants of St. John and the Virgin Islands, and with their placement near slave communities they possibly symbolized belonging to the land, family relationships, and community heritage. (Figure 15).

L'Esperance Estate possesses what looks to be a rectangular grave marker that lies outside of the estate cemetery walls. Inside the estate cemetery at L'Esperance is the grave of Mr. Tonis (Figure 16), an owner of the estate in the early 18th century. Five grave markers bearing no names lie with his (Figure 17), and these could be family members, employees, and/or laborers. The marker outside the walls may be that of an enslaved laborer, because it bears no name or date of death and it is in proximity to the slave laborer village remains.
Furthermore, its placement suggests that it once overlooked an open space that, according to 18th century Moravian missionary, C.G.A. Oldendorp (1987[1777]), was the site of Moravian meetings and worship for the slaves on the estate (Figure 18).

Churchyard Burials: A Resting Place for Everyone?

Churches were also important places of burial on St. John. Burials in the Lutheran and Moravian churchyards, two of the most popular congregations on St. John in the 18th and 19th centuries, symbolized a person's religious devotion and church membership. Churchyard burials were often restricted to European church members. However, church mortuary records indicate that some enslaved African members were buried in the churchyards or on church property, while the majority was buried on the estates where they lived (Moravian Burial Records, Emmaus Church, St. John, 1833-1881). The churchyards at Bethany and Emmaus Moravian churches and the Nazareth Lutheran churchyard may contain deceased enslaved laborers, although there are no definite grave markers or diagnostics to support this. Possible markers for the enslaved may be informal piles of stone present in the churchyards (Figures 19 and 20). It is also possible that slave burials may not have been marked in the churchyard, making them imperceptible above ground.

Post-Emancipation Burials

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, race, class, and religion still impacted the commemorative markers of people of European and African descent, while the types of locations remained similar. Reef Bay estate possesses a cemetery south of the estate buildings, between the sugar factory and the ocean's edge. Numerous adult tamarind trees, some blown over by hurricane winds, grow around the burials. A collection of 8-10 marked burials have been identified, most of which are informal markers of coarse and un-worked stone that outline the burial (Figure 21). Additionally, some markers are piles of coarse stone (Figure 22). It is possible that enslaved laborers were buried here, but there is better evidence for the burials of freed people of color.

One burial sticks out from the crowd at the Reef Bay cemetery (Figure 23). It is the only one to possess a formal masonry marker with an inscription. The inscription bears the name of William Marsh who owned the Reef Bay estate in the late 19th century and early 20th century. He was a descendent of the mixed race Marsh family who moved from Tortola to St. John in the nineteenth century. William Marsh passed away in 1909, and he is commemorated in the cemetery by a rectangular monument with an erect Christian cross on the marker's west end. Marsh is also said to be accompanied in the cemetery by two daughters, whose graves are outlined by coarse field stone. Their markers do not possess names or inscriptions. The other nameless burials could be family members and laborers of the estate. A similar example lies in the cemetery for the Beverhoudt family in Cruz Bay, the main town of St. John. This cemetery, used by people of color, now stands on a hill behind a popular restaurant called the Banana Deck. A thick brick wall with one entrance surrounds the 6 graves inside, all made of brick, mortar, and stone (Figure 24). It appears that the 6 burials are members of the same family and/or unit. The marker
pictured here does not bear a name but possesses a Christian cross (Figure 25). Only two graves bear names and inscriptions, one for Ann L. Beverhoudt, d. 1879, the other for Sarah Elizabeth Martin (Figure 26a, 26b), d. 1858. In addition, a seventh nameless burial, marked by a rectangular vault, stands outside the cemetery wall, suggesting that this burial may be for a person who was excluded or distinguished from the other burials. Perhaps this wasn't a relative and instead, this was the grave of a family employee. On the other hand, the cemetery walls enclose a relatively small space and the seventh marker may be for a family member who passed away after the cemetery became full.

The Reef Bay and Beverhoudt estate cemeteries are similar to the Leinster estate cemetery containing James Murphy's grave mentioned earlier because they contain the prosperous landowner as well as possible family members, employees, and laborers. However, James Murphy was a Euro-Caribbean landowner while William Marsh and the Beverhoudts were landowners of color. As living members of the St. John community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, free people of color increasingly owned land (Hall 1992). In addition, some had access to more durable burial markers, such as brick, stone, and marble, and had more freedom to bury their dead on their properties, in churchyards, and in public cemeteries. With respect to the Reef Bay and Beverhoudt estate cemeteries, the two burial sites possess ornate markers for the estate owners, regardless of race and gender, and more modest ones for family members, employees, and/or laborers. The above cases, however, do not appear to be common for free people of African descent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this may be based on community and/or cultural preferences, several contemporaneous markers were made of unworked local stone, probably because it was accessible in the landscape to a free population that still struggled economically and did not purchase commercial and mass-produced grave markers advertised in newspapers and business listings such as the Lightbourn West India Annual and Commercial Directories.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, Karen Olwig's (1985, 1994) interviews with St. John natives who grew up in the early 20th century revealed that many burial sites for family members, often on family property, provided a sense of belonging and heritage. Similar information has been obtained for different groups around the world, including Afro-Jamaican communities (Besson 2002; Brown 2006), 19th century Jewish communities on Nevis (Gradwohl 1998; Terrell 2005), and European and North American societies in the 18th and 19th centuries (Aries 1974; Mytum 2004). With respect to Afro- and Euro-Caribbean peoples on St. John, the landscapes and locations of the markers within the cemeteries mentioned in this paper suggests that while the presence, nature, and lack of burial markers was largely dependent on a person's access to commemorative marker materials, the locations had significance for family heritage, community belonging, a sense of security, and religious commitments and beliefs. Although marker materials may have changed for some people of color after emancipation, burial locations continued to be diverse. Based on the evidence, people buried their family, friends, and associates in accessible areas near the deceased's dwellings or in a community cemetery. Since many people did not have access to durable and lasting
burial markers over time, evidence suggests that a burial's location in the landscape conveyed significant symbolism that honored the dead.

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Note

* Helen Blouet is a doctoral candidate in archaeology and anthropology at Syracuse University.

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