

I WASN'T THERE for the beginning of the dig because I'm rather claustrophobic," says Travis Parno, a tall, soft-spoken grad student. "But this was easily the most fascinating find of my short career, so I sucked it up and went down. It was pretty scary, especially the first time."

Parno, who is working toward his doctorate in historical archaeology at Boston University, was part of a team—led by his classmate and best friend, Brent Fortenberry—that spent last summer beneath the floorboards of St. Peter's Church in the colonial town of St. George's, Bermuda. They had been invited by the Reverend David Raths, the priest in charge of the Anglican church, to search for the remains of the original cedar structure erected in 1612.

It wasn't easy. The church had been rebuilt and renovated many times in its history, so the area beneath it is divided into small chambers and narrow crawlspaces by forgotten walls and support beams, tightening the room in which the excavators had to work to just 18 to 36 inches. The archaeologists had to contort themselves and lie on their stomachs to dig in the airless, hot, humid space.

"My hands were shaking," Parno recalls. "It was very, very cramped, very dirty. My back

Mystery in Bermuda

How did the bodies of two important historical figures end up beneath the floorboards of a church?

by ELIZABETH GEHRMAN





Archaeologists Travis Parno and Sarah Ayers Rigsby excavate the remains of a former colonial governor in the suffocating space beneath St. Peter's Church (below, left) in the historic Bermudian town of St. George's.

was scraping up against the floorboards. But the magnitude of the find just bowled me over. I sort of forgot about my claustrophobia.”

What compelled Parno to overcome his anxiety and disregard the fact that he was sandwiched between rocky ground and ancient floor joists? Skeletons. Skeletons in a place no one expected, and with artifacts identifying them as the remains of two important men in Bermudian history.

THE OLDEST CONTINUALLY INHABITED British settlement in the New World, Bermuda presents a unique opportunity for historical archaeologists. It has no indigenous population, so the human past of this tiny island began when it was settled in 1612, three years after English admiral Sir George Somers was blown off course and onto its treacherous reefs en route to Jamestown.

The British territory, 600 miles off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, made an excellent mid-Atlantic stopover for ships bound for the colonies. It quickly developed a thriving economy centered in St. George's, the original capital and the island's commercial hub for two centuries.

“Everyone talks about St. George's as being a town in a time

warp,” says Richard Lowry, chair of the archaeology research committee of the Bermuda National Trust (BNT). “From the beginning, St. George's made a terrific amount of money and was always evolving. But after the capital moved to Hamilton in 1815, there was a real lack of development here.”

A town that thrived for many years but has since been left largely undeveloped would seem like a mecca for archaeologists. However, little work has been done in St. George's, which was named a World Heritage Site in 2000 for its historic architecture and fortifications. The St. Peter's Church dig, sponsored by the Bank of Bermuda Foundation and undertaken in preparation for the self-governing territory's 400th anniversary, is part of a comprehensive survey that will eventually be included in a widely accessible online database. Last summer, the BNT asked Fortenberry, who had worked on other BNT sites and was familiar with the area's history, to direct the project. In addition to Parno, he brought in Hope Shannon, a Boston undergrad, and Sarah Ayers Rigsby, an archaeologist from Virginia.

“It was an amazing find,” Fortenberry says of the remains. “Something no one had even considered the possibility of. Just astonishing.”

There was no known documentation of any burials beneath St. Peter's or any other Bermudian church. "In the larger Anglican and Christian world," Fortenberry says, "it was not unusual to put bodies under the floorboards." But in Bermuda, there's no record of any such burials.

Once the team had begun excavating, though, they learned that the burials may not be as rare as they believed. They found a 1952 article in the local *Royal Gazette* detailing renovations at the church in preparation for a visit from Elizabeth II, who had just succeeded to the throne. The story quotes the church's archdeacon, John Stow—" [W]e have found scores of graves"—but says little else about the discovery.

Fortenberry could not locate anyone who worked on the renovation, but interviewed the nephew of one of the masons. Cyril Dowling, a retired maintenance supervisor for the BNT, remembers that the bones elicited great curiosity among locals, but, according to Lowry, "the curiosity never seemed to go anywhere." Most of the bones that were not damaged appear to have been left alone or haphazardly reinterred. Dowling recalls that some of the remains were put in boxes and blessed by the pastor before being buried. The archaeologists have not yet located those boxes, but believe many bones were simply scattered during the renovation.

Since then, no one had ventured beyond the main chamber below the church, about the area of a king-size bed and separated from the other chambers by an 18-inch crawlspace formed by what appears to have been the wall of a family crypt. (A 1714 addition to the church was built over the adjacent graveyard. The bodies were carefully reinterred, according to Fortenberry, but some of the original structures remain.) "Just out of sheer curiosity, we thought, 'Why not try to get into the next chamber?'" Fortenberry says. There was also a possibility that postholes from the 1612 foundation would be there, since it is closer to the church's altar.

The team squeezed through the crawlspace and began dividing the second chamber into square excavation units. Their excitement mounted when, six inches into the ground in the first unit, they found disarticulated remains and an

Brent Fortenberry, head of the excavation team, squeezes into one of the tight spaces below the church.



identifying coffin plate. In the second unit they uncovered another plate. The first skeleton had a structural wall built through it during one of the church's many renovations, so the team could excavate only a portion of it. The second skeleton was missing three major leg bones but was otherwise intact.

THE PLATE FOUND WITH THE PARTIAL SKELETON is dated February 1783 and identifies the body as that of Sir Jacob Wheate, commander of the HMS *Cerberus*, a 28-gun frigate. Wheate was a baronet and the first Royal Navy captain to have been buried in Bermuda. He was a "sort of a Horatio Hornblower type," says Lowry, referring to the naval hero of C.S. Forester's adventure novels. Shortly after Wheate's death, the *Cerberus* went down in a narrow channel near Castle Harbour. As a result of that wreck, the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty forbade the use of Castle Harbour, shifting Bermuda's development to the other end of the island and changing the course of its history.

At first, the archaeologists speculated that Wheate had been buried hastily under the church because he had died of yellow fever. But a sketch from the journal of John Harvey Darrell, secretary of the colonial government shortly after Wheate's death, shows the captain's grave in nearby Somers Garden. At least until more historical documents are discovered—Fortenberry plans to scour archives in both Bermuda and England—how Wheate got under the church will remain a mystery. "Either he was buried in the church and they put the memorial elsewhere, which would be odd," says Lowry, "or they were doing some work at Somers Garden and they exhumed the bodies and didn't reinter them there."

The other, nearly intact skeleton has an even more interesting history. Its plate identifies the remains as those of George James Bruere, governor of Bermuda from 1764 to 1780. He presided over the colony during the 1775 gunpowder plot, in which a group of American sympathizers stole hundreds of barrels of the explosive compound from a St. George's fort. "They rolled the barrels down to Tobacco Bay," says Lowry, "where they were met by a fleet of whaleboats and then taken to American ships." George Washington's Continental Army, which had been running low on ammunition, promptly turned the supplies against the British.

After the plot was discovered, the staunchly loyalist governor offered a reward of 100 pounds for information, and a bonus of 30 more and immunity to anyone who would turn king's evidence. Bruere's daughter was married to the son of Henry Tucker—one of Bermuda's most prominent merchants and a supposed mastermind of the plot. The clueless governor put Tucker in charge of the investigation, which, needless to say, turned up nothing.

Tensions ran high between the governor and Bermuda's pro-America assembly, and after one particularly acrimonious altercation, the assembly voted to have Bruere replaced. They were planning to petition the king to that effect when, as a stalling tactic, Bruere adjourned the parliament. He died shortly thereafter at age 59.

When the skeletons were found, no definitive account of Bruere's death was known. A musket ball found near a leg bone initially led to speculation that he had been shot, but eventually the archaeologists found historical accounts saying that shortly after his skirmish with the assembly, Bruere became ill with fever and languished a couple of months before dying.

"[The ball] was tantalizing, given what went on before he became ill," says Lowry. "Sort of like a dark comedy. But archaeologically, it's not supported. The musket ball was not linked with his burial."

Jill Bewsher Humphries, an English osteologist, examined Bruere's remains in November. She didn't find a nick on his femur, but determined that the governor had painful arthritis and an unhealed broken rib.

As with Wheate, the archaeologists are mystified by how Bruere ended up under the church. His obituary notes that he was carried by torchlight from the government house to the church, where he lay in state "with all the honours of war," including 100 armed grenadiers, a battalion of 256 men, and



George James Bruere—whose remains were found with a copper coffin plate—was governor during the 1775 gunpowder plot, when American sympathizers stole supplies and handed them over to Washington's Continental Army.



"drums covered with black, beating the dead march." The obit notes that "the Corpse" came to rest in the church's aisle, but doesn't mention a burial.

Because of all the pomp, says Lowry, "you'd think Bruere would have been put in a family vault or taken back to England. It's odd that the loyalist papers describe quite an elaborate funeral service, yet he wasn't given a formal grave." Lowry speculates that the body was stashed under the church to protect it from grave robbers while it awaited removal to England. "If the Bermudians didn't like Bruere as much as we think they didn't," he says, "it may have been the safest place for him."

"We've barely scratched the surface of this," Lowry adds, discussing the months of research that remain to be done, including digging through the church vestry records, assem-

bly minutes, and other documents in the Bermuda archives, as well as researching the parish records in Bruere's and Wheate's hometowns in England.

During the dig last summer, the team also found, resting on Bruere's pelvis, a partial skull belonging to a third individual not accompanied by a coffin plate. It contained a

desiccated clump of black matter that Bewsher Humphries identified as a probable tumor. Other bones recovered suggest there were as many as five individuals in the chamber, and the archaeologists believe there are many more. "I think it's very possible there are remains under other churches," says Lowry. "A lot of older churches have been here 300 or 350 years, and there are nine parishes and at least a dozen Anglican churches, as well as a number of garrison chapels around the island. Certainly when any renovations are done, we will do archaeological assessments."

Like the remains found in 1952, the St. Peter's finds caused quite a stir. Locals lined up around the block to see the coffin plates and a life-size photo of Bruere's skeleton. The bones recovered so far will be reinterred in a graveyard vault by the current governor, Sir Richard Gozney, and the Reverend Raths in June. And next summer, the BNT project will continue to look for the church's original structure.

But for now the team hardly needs to unearth more mysteries, with Wheate and Bruere giving it so much to think about. "We're definitely coming up with more questions than answers," says Lowry, "which is great. It leads to more stories." ■

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