

# Recent Excavations at St Peter's Church, St George's Bermuda

*Brent Fortenberry*

*In 2008 archaeologists from Boston University and the Bermuda National Trust were invited by St Peter's church, in St George's Bermuda, to initiate a study of the English colonial world's oldest continually used Anglican church. Their initial goals included a survey of the churchyard and several crawl spaces just below the building's floorboards. While their research was aimed at uncovering the below ground architectural history and phasing of the site, their work soon led them to the discovery of two forgotten burials, hidden away below the main aisle of the church.*

During the summer of 2008 archaeologists from the Bermuda National Trust's (BNT) St George's Archaeological Research Project (S.GARP) and Boston University (BU) conducted six weeks of excavations at St Peter's church in the town of St George's, Bermuda. The project team was invited by Reverend W David Raths, the St Peter's Church Vestry (church council), and the Friends of St Peter's Church to explore the archaeological and architectural significance of the site: the English colonial world's oldest continually used

Anglican church. The goals of the research were twofold: first, to survey all the memorials inside the church and in the churchyard, and second, to explore a series of subsurface spaces between the building's foundations and the local bedrock. Our ongoing efforts hope to contribute to the archaeological and architectural understanding of St Peter's church, digging into the diverse stories of a place that has helped to shape life in St George's and Bermuda for nearly four hundred years (Fig 1).

## *History of the Church*

The English first landed on Bermuda through an act of fate. The wreck of *HMS Sea Venture*, the flagship of the third Jamestown Colony supply convoy, initiated the first sustained human presence on the island in 1609. It was not until 1612, however, that a proper colony was founded in concert with the Virginia Company of London. Bermuda's first church (known as St Peter from the early 19th century), sits just to the north of Duke of York Street in the heart of the UNESCO World Heritage Site and Historic Preservation Area in St George's; it was commissioned

*Fig 1*  
*Southern Façade of St Peter's Church*  
*(photo Lynn Thorne, Bermuda National Trust)*

by Governor Richard Moore in 1612. The design and construction of this building is unknown; however, given the early colonial earthfast building tradition in the Chesapeake and Bermuda, architectural historians have argued that this building used this post-in-ground technique (Jarvis 1998). It is said that the church was completed before Christmas 1612 (Stow 1954, 6). There is some debate whether the current site of St Peter's is indeed the original 1612 site. Prominent Bermuda historian Michael Jarvis maintains the original church was located on one of the hills overlooking the town, and it was not until 1619 that the church was moved to its current location (Jarvis 1998).

Without doubt the weather, in particular hurricanes, wreaked havoc on the post-in-ground structure and by 1619 another 'more permanent' church was built under the supervision of Governor Kendall, and was completed by the time Governor

Butler arrived in October 1619 (Stow 1954, 8; Jarvis 1998, 28). In August of the following year the first General Assembly met in the church (Stow 1954, 8). An image of the church appeared in an engraving published by John Smith in 1624 (Smith and Barbour, 1986). This church, like its predecessor, was shown as a post-in-ground structure with a thatched roof. According to Smith its form was a single rectangular room with a porch facing south (Jarvis 1998, 29).

It was not until another hurricane struck the island and damaged the church in 1713 that a new stone structure was built. Instead of using the post-in-ground construction of its predecessors, this building had a limestone foundation (Spurling 2007). It is likely that they extended the original post-in-ground phase to the west. A vestry was added to the north side of the structure that complimented the entrance vestibule to the south, and 'Welcoming Arms' steps were added leading up from Duke of York Street (Stow 1954,

*Fig 2*

*Architectural phasing of St Peter's church, not to scale (author, Bermuda National Trust)*

10–11). By the early 19th century two more wings were added on either side of a newly extended south entrance: a three-sided eastern apse was added, and a bell tower was constructed on the north-western side of the nave (Stow 1954, 12). In 1826 the church was officially renamed St Peter's church (Stow 1954, 12) and in 1833 galleries were added for persons of African descent to attend the church (Stow 1954, 13).

St Peter's church narrowly avoided demolition in the 1860s. Because the church was viewed as too small and too old, the Vestry began construction of a new church at the site of the third Government House on a hill overlooking the Town. However, constant bickering and shifting church politics doomed this new structure despite the fact it was virtually completed. The Vestry decided to remain at St Peter's and extensive work to repair the old church was completed in 1908 (Jarvis 1998, 31).

Finally, several restoration phases were completed in the 1950s, comprising reinforcing the extant superstructure by adding dwarf walls beneath the floorboards and strengthening walls with concrete (Spurling 2007).

### *Churchyard Survey*

In 2006 the husband-and-wife team Richard and Hilary Tulloch completed a survey of Bermuda's military cemeteries that included a study of all legible inscriptions within St Peter's church and graveyard (Tulloch and Tulloch 2006). While their work was exhaustive, it did not include stones with illegible inscriptions, nor an overall plan of the churchyard. To build on this work the research team mapped every marker and plotted its position within the churchyard. Each stone was entered into a database identifying it with a unique number, providing its description and a photographic record. We hope to make this database publicly accessible. The final project phase is the construction of a 3-D churchyard model using Google's free *Sketchup* software (Fig 3). In this model, the building itself, the subterranean spaces that were investigated, as well as each gravestone are rendered in three dimensions. This model will also be made available to the public through a number of local websites as a promotional and educational tool in the future.

Fig 3

*3-D image of Church Reconstruction (Travis Parno, Bermuda National Trust)*

### *Excavation*

Our second goal was to investigate three spaces under the 19th-century southern extensions of the church and the east-west space under the church's main aisle.

### *The Southern Space (Fig 2)*

From the arrangement of the three spaces we postulated that this area was originally open churchyard, so, as the church expanded to the south it was at the expense of the existing graveyard. Therefore, the memorials that intruded into the building's expansion were situated within the crawl spaces, with the bodies sealed underneath the new church foundation. The current arrangement of these three spaces is as follows:

West: one room with an assortment of memorials merely tossed into the space. Each of these memorials was drawn in place and recorded.

The middle space contains the brick entry steps to the 1713 church; they are worn and appear to align with that period of architectural phasing of the structure.

The eastern space comprises a series of 26 stones that have been fixed to the foundation walls. These are some of the oldest stones remaining at St Peter's.

We consider that this room most likely resembled the western space prior to the 1950s restoration of the

church. However, as a part of the preparation of the church for a royal visit, some of the oldest and best-preserved stones were put on display for the Queen. The presence of restoration workers is further evidenced by several graffiti etchings made by the workers in 1951 and 1954 on the southern foundation wall, providing their initials as well as the year. These three spaces and their contents will be added to the 3-D model of the church with photographs of the stones visible on the 3-D objects in real space.

trench for the 1950s wall. Further east however, a larger density of human remains was observed. After consulting with Rev Raths and the St Peter's Church Vestry, we continued uncovering these remains so they could be taken to the archaeology laboratory for further examination. They were then to be prepared for later reburial since it appeared that the remains

### *The Northern Space*

*Fig 4*

*Excavation in the Northern Space (photo Richard Lowry, Bermuda National Trust)*

By far the most intriguing part of the 2008 field season was the discovery of two individuals beneath the floorboards of the east-west aisle of the current structure. Our aim in investigating this area was to locate and investigate any remaining architectural fragments from the 1612 or 1619 churches. This space was created by 1950s restoration in which support foundation walls were placed in an east-west orientation some five feet (1.52m) apart creating a two and a half foot (0.76m) high space underneath the floorboards (Figs 2, 4).

The working hypothesis was that if the far eastern portion of the structure was indeed the location of the original 1612 or 1619 churches, then perhaps some of the postholes still remained cut into the bedrock. Excavations began in the eastern portion of the space removing the roughly 18 inches (0.46m) of the deposits underneath the floorboards, dividing the area into two foot (0.6m) units. The first unit yielded little except an uneven line of bedrock and what was left of a builder's

*Fig 5*

*Composite Image of Governor George James Bruere (photo: Bermuda National Trust)*

Fig 6

Coffin Plate of Governor George James Bruere (photo Bermuda National Trust)

were not interred in accordance with proper burial practice. The deposit produced a human cranium on the southern terminus of the space, which appeared to be articulated to further bones. The two-foot (0.6m) grid system was extended to allow excavation along the southern wall of the space in the area where the rest of the remains might be located.

The remains of a partially articulated human were uncovered. Lodged in the area of the individual's torso was a nameplate indicating that this was the body of Governor George James Bruere (d. 1780). The coffin plate reads: *'His Excellency/ George James Bruere/ Governor of Bermudal and Lieu Colo in his/ Majesty's Service OB/ The 10 Sep<sup>r</sup> 1780 / AE 59 Years'* (Figs 5 and 6). There is ongoing research in order to piece together Governor's life and determine why he was buried underneath the church. An early lead came when Michael Jarvis found an account of George Bruere's funeral in the *New York Gazette* (1780); it maintained that the Governor's funeral was held by torchlight in St Peter's church with full military honors, but the obituary does not provide the site of the burial. Nonetheless it seems that after the funeral service they simply pried up a few of the floorboards and placed the Governor beneath the church itself. Even so, no plaque or gravestone memorializing his burial exists inside the church.

Bruere himself was a controversial Governor: his tenure coincided with the American Revolution. His was a pro-British voice among a growing Bermudian populace that supported the American cause. Most infamously Bruere was in power during the (Bermuda) Gun Powder Plot in which British gunpowder was stolen by a group of pro-Americans, rolled to nearby Tobacco Bay, and shipped to Charleston for use by the American Army and used in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Bruere placed his son-in-law, Colonel Henry Tucker, in charge of the investigation, not knowing that Tucker himself was the plot's mastermind. It is unknown why Bruere was placed under the floorboards. Perhaps he was meant to be shipped back to England and his final resting place was meant to only be temporary. Or perhaps he was placed there for fear of grave robbers coming to loot the burial, or, even worse, to destroy the body given people's distaste for the man. In the spring of 2009 St Peter's church, the Bermuda Government, and the Bermuda National Trust reburied the governor in a place of prominence in the churchyard. He was buried with full military honors and his funeral was conducted according to 18th-century Anglican practice.

On the northern side of the space the coffin plate of Sir Jacob Wheate Captain of the *HMS Cerberus* was uncovered, which was associated with disarticulated

human remains. The coffin plate reads: 'Sir Jacob Wheate BART/ Commander of his Majestys/ Ship Cerberus OBT/ The 12 February 1783.' While most of the Captain's body was truncated by a 1950s retaining wall, many of his disarticulated remains were recovered during our initial excavation. The plate was retained for conservation, but the majority of his remains were left *in situ* underneath the church to be studied during the upcoming 2010 campaign.

Even without the removal of the remains, simply knowing their identity was a major boost to research efforts. Commander Sir Jacob Wheate was captain of the *HMS Cerberus*, as his coffin plate attests. Nonetheless, he was not aboard his ship when it sank, for not three months after his marriage to Miss Maria Shaw in New York City in 1782, Wheate died from yellow fever (Middleton 1967, 121). Of his ship, however, much is known. Just nine days after the captain's death, the pilot for Castle Roads (the exit to Castle Harbour, the main entry into the town of St George's) came onboard the *Cerberus* at 9am on February 21st 1783, in order to navigate. By 11am the ship had run on the rocks. Orders were given to throw all the cannon overboard to lighten the load. With water pouring into all the hatches and no chance to save the sinking vessel, all were ordered into lifeboats (Middleton 1967, 123). The wreck of the *Cerberus*, now known as the Musket Shot Wreck, is a popular dive location.

Until 2008 the whereabouts of Sir Jacob Wheate were unknown. It states in the register of births and deaths that Wheate was laid to rest in St George's on the 14th of February (Middleton 1967, 122). John Harvey Darrell, in a map of Somer's Garden (the main public garden in the town, half a kilometer from the church), places the remains of Wheate next to the entrails of George Somers. Nevertheless we know that at least now the captain was not located in Somer's Garden but beneath the floor of St Peter's. We hope to excavate Sir Jacob's remains in the summer of 2010 and continue to investigate eastward in the space to continue our search for the 17th century remains of the church.

*Brent Fortenberry was awarded the Society for Church Archaeology's prize for his work entitled The Life of a Church and the Eventual Death of a State House: Public Space in St George's Bermuda*

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## Acknowledgements

*I would like to thank Reverend Rath, the Vestry Council of St Peter's, and the congregation of St Peter's church. Also, Richard Lowry, Linda Abend, Stephen Copeland, and Andrew Baylay of the Bermuda National Trust Archaeological Research Committee for their continued support of my research. Thanks also go to Mary Beaudry for her continued counsel during my research. Finally, I thank my research team: Travis Parno, Sara Ayers-Rigsby, and Hope Shannon for their dedication in the field.*

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