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AN "ARCHAEOLOGICAL" ANALYSIS OF HISTORIC CEMETERIES ON SAN SALVADOR, THE BAHAMAS

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological perspectives on historic sites are not limited to those subjected to excavation, nor are they confined to the study of domestic and community living spaces. This paper applies archaeological approaches of landscapes and material culture to the five municipal cemeteries on the island of San Salvador. The paper begins with an introduction to the archaeological and historical study of cemeteries, provides context for the cultural and historical development of cemeteries in the Bahamas, and presents the results of a comprehensive documentation project of visible grave markers in cemeteries on San Salvador. These elements are combined to discuss how practices of burial and commemoration can inform on the development of distinct local communities on the island, while also providing evidence for contact and communication. As San Salvador has a limited presence in the documentary record of the Bahamas during the time these cemeteries were established, a systematic and contextual study of grave markers can give important insights to the historical development of the island.

INTRODUCTION

Most people have some degree of anecdotal familiarity with cemeteries and graveyards. They pass by them in their daily commutes, perhaps stroll across their grounds on the way to church, and/or attend services for friends, family, and community members within their boundaries. Rarely, however, do people think of cemeteries as important historic sites that contain valuable information about community history, and even more rarely do people undertake the systematic investigation of cemeteries and graveyards to learn about the unique history of these sites (but for the Bahamas see Aranha 2008, Johnson Clarke 2001).

Historians and archaeologists are notable exceptions as they have long been interested in the study of cemeteries and burial sites as ways of learning about the past. Historians have recognized the written information contained on grave stones and other markers as useful sources of information to study family and community histories, demography, and systems of social networks and beliefs. Archaeological approaches to cemeteries emphasize the material nature of graveyards and cemeteries focusing on the landscape and layout of the sites as well as the materials, shapes, and sizes of the grave markers. The combination of historical and archaeological information that is very well dated and fixed in place has made the study of historic cemeteries an important area of investigation in historical archaeology (Brock and Schwartz 1991, Elia 1992, Little et al. 1992, Tarlow 1999).

Approaches to cemeteries in historical archaeology do not generally involve the excavation of the graves themselves, although on other islands in the Caribbean region archaeologists have excavated individual graves and cemeteries dating to the periods of slavery on those island (Armstrong and Fleischman 2003, Courtard et al. 1999, Handler and Lange 1978). More often, historical archaeologists use archaeological approaches to systematically study the headstones and grave markers in cemeteries to look for patterns that may reveal important changes over time. Pioneering studies in the historical archaeology of cemeteries revealed, for example, that the design motifs and shapes of gravestones in the United States

changed significantly and rather abruptly after the American Revolution as a way to emphasize a departure from British roots and to embrace a new national identity for America (Deetz 1996).

These types of studies are predicated on understandings developed by archaeologists working in prehistoric and early historic periods around the globe, which have enabled archaeologists to use burials as important sources of evidence for the types of social relationships and belief systems operating in the past (Parker Pearson 2001). The first of these important ideas is that burials are only one of many forms of mortuary practice documented in different societies, and other types practices do not leave the same archaeological "signature" as burials do. In cultures that do use burials, the archaeological visibility of these areas depends upon the placement of headstones or grave markers to make their location known on the landscape. Therefore, archaeological studies using burials as a form of evidence are often incomplete. The second significant idea is that people do not conduct their own funerals or erect their own memorials. While an individual may state their wishes about their burial, it is the members of the family and community who ultimately decide how an individual will be commemorated and interred. Therefore, some parts of a person's grave may say much about them, and other parts may reveal more about their family and community. Finally, is the recognition that cemeteries are active and dynamic sites that are continually being altered through patterns of maintenance, visitation, and use by members of the living community. Cemeteries, like all archaeological sites, are constantly being altered and changed.

These ideas informed a systematic study of cemeteries on the island of San Salvador during the summer of 2006. All five of the official, municipal cemeteries on the island (see below) were the focus of investigation. Each cemetery was mapped to look for patterns in grave placement and orientation. Different types of grave markers were identified and each grave was then recorded as belonging to one of these categories. Special features, such as the presence of grave goods,

were noted for each grave, and all legible inscriptions were recorded.

Undoubtedly, people who live on San Salvador have their own sense of history around these special places in their communities; however, the goal of this study was to use approaches from historical archaeology to offer an understanding the island's cemeteries from a different perspective. It is hoped that this approach will allow visitors to the island to gain an appreciation for these sites, and to offer insights that may be useful for the study and preservation of cemeteries throughout the archipelago. Substantively, this analysis points to individual community identities being formed during the historic period, offers evidence for the interconnectedness of these newly founded settlements, and demonstrates the various cultural influences on historical burial practices on the island.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND
FOR CEMETERIES IN THE BAHAMAS

Many aspects of Bahamian cemeteries and burial customs were brought by the Loyalists from the United States, and others came from Britian where the colonial government established standards for cemeteries on the islands (Kerrigan 2007, Mytum 2003). Other influences came from Africa as enslaved peoples and their free descendants adapted traditional systems of belief and commemoration to the circumstances of their new home (Fennell 2007, Genovese 1972, Jamieson 1995).

Formal burial grounds as we recognize them today are thought to have originated in Christian Europe during the medieval period, when people wanted to be buried "close to God". Individuals were interred under the floorboards and in the walls of churches, a practice that continued until these areas became too crowded and the practice became too unpleasant for worshipers. Graveyards were established around churches as a solution to this problem and walled areas around churches became the final resting place for congregational members. Burials in graveyards were placed in tight rows and no formal pathways or access points were incorporated into graveyard

design. Occasionally, community members with more wealth and clout were buried closer to the church (and closer to God) but generally people were interred in the order of their passing. There were some smaller, secular grave yards that were also established at this time. This type of interment practice was brought to the United States in the 17th and 18th centuries (National Register of Historic Places 2009).

Concerns about the possibilities of disease and broader interests in hygiene caused a change in burial practices in the early 19th century. In both England and the United States, church graveyards were replaced by formal cemeteries, often called rural garden cemeteries. These sites were planned landscapes outside of the boundaries of established towns and cities. They were walled sites with a single entrance and a series of paths that lead visitors to different areas within the cemetery. The sites were landscaped to be aesthetically beautiful and were designed to encourage regular visitors. Families were able to purchase burial plots in advance, the location of which could be revealing about their social standing in the living community. While graveyards grew up organically around churches, these new cemeteries were carefully planned spaces designed to showcase the markers contained within. Many cemeteries in the Bahamas demonstrate characteristics of both graveyards and cemeteries as cultural influences from the United States and Britian continued throughout this period when burial practices were changing. African influences are harder to detect in formal cemeteries, particularly on New Providence, but are perhaps more present on some of the family islands (Johnson Clark 2001, Turner 2009). Contemporary burial practices and those recorded in relatively recent history do reflect the African heritage of many Bahamians. The presence of active burial societies, the tradition of "wake-holding" and the placement of the deceased person's special eating vessels on graves are all practices associated with African traditions. Indeed, the community-wide involvement in many memorial services is an important link to African heritage as well (Bahamas Handbook 1970-1, Johnson Clarke 2001, Thomas 1975). While many of these types of activities are

social activities of the living, the grave markers and other memorials placed in cemeteries are the material remains of these important community and family rituals. The study of cemeteries, therefore, offers a link to the social practices of communities in the past as well.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CEMETERIES ON SAN SALVADOR

There are five official, municipal cemeteries on the island of San Salvador (San Salvador Island Commissioner's Office 1999). Four of these are in direct association with existing settlements: North Victoria Hill, United Estates, Sugarloaf, and Cockburn Town. Farquharson's Cemetery is associated with a community that flourished on the southeast side of the island until the mid-20th century, but which is now largely abandoned (Figure 1). There are other types of burial sites on the island, including a Catholic Cemetery in Cockburn Town, an earlier cemetery near United Estates that is not considered an "official" burial ground, and several individual graves or small family plots, particularly associated with historic sites on the island. This work focuses on the five official, municipal burial grounds on the island.
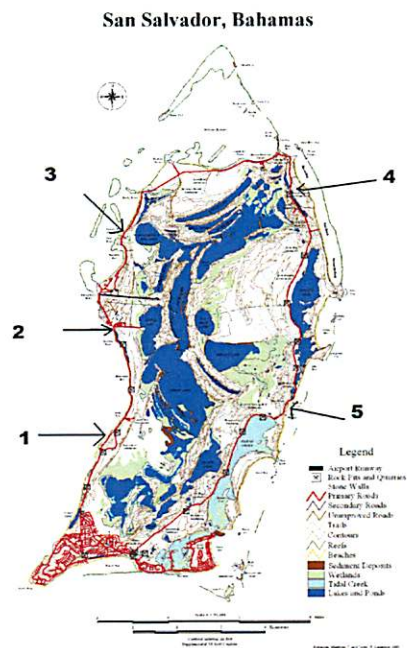

Figure 1. Map showing the location of the five municipal cemeteries on San Salvador. Basemap

courtesy of http://www.newhaven.edu/san salvador/gis/index.htm. Map key: 1- Sugarloaf or Sandy Point Cemetery, 2- Cockburn Town Municipal Cemetery, 3- North Victoria Hill Cemetery, 4- United Estates Cemetery, 5- Farquharson's Cemetery.

These five cemeteries all share some characteristics, which may relate to their "official" status, and also the cultural values that helped to shape the appearance and location of these cemeteries. All of these cemeteries are separated from the community physically and symbolically by a wall or fence that may have one or more entryways. At least three of these cemeteries have been expanded during their lifetime as well, as United Estates, Sugarloaf and Cockburn Town cemeteries have a wall inside the cemetery that has been removed to ground level, leaving only a footprint of the wall in view. These appear to be the remains of former exterior walls that demarcated the cemetery and not an internal division within each cemetery.

In the cases of Sugarloaf and United Estates, the cemetery is also physically separated from the community to the extent that the cemetery is not visible from the settlement itself. Cockburn Town's cemetery is located on the southern end of the settlement and away from most residences, but is located prominently along the Queen's Highway and is integrated into the landscape of the community. North Victoria Hill has grown to incorporate its cemetery, which stands in the "front yard" of a community church and directly along the Queen's Highway. None of these cemeteries is in an historic churchyard, but instead are set aside as particular spaces in the landscape of the community with surrounding walls and limited points of entry. In this regard, these municipal cemeteries loosely follow the ideals of the rural, garden cemetery movement in Britain and the United States.

Figure 2. A Montage of Grave Types Found on San Salvador. Clockwise from Upper Left: A modern "Bahamian" grave, A lingum vitae tree, A "sarcophagus" style grave, A series of rock piles, An upright limestone slab, A plant surrounded by a rock circle.

Pre-planned, walled spaces with limited points of access are very typical of cemeteries, but cemetery design also dictates that cemeteries have internal structures, including paths and roadways to guide access and pre-established burial plots for families and individuals. These types of features are absent in all five official cemeteries on San Salvador. Individual interments generally are in regularly-spaced rows and the intermittent placement of grave markings in some of these rows suggests many graves may have been left unmarked. Graves are oriented on an east/west axis and where determinable, headstones are placed at the west end of the grave, as is typical in most Christian burial practices. The practice of reusing graves is also not uncommon due to the difficulty of manual excavation in the limestone bedrock, and all cemeteries are regularly maintained (Cemetery Caretaker personal communication 2000). These aspects of design and use may have many origins, but do demonstrate similarities with graveyards in the United States and Britain and are

are consistent with cemeteries elsewhere in the Bahamas, including St. Matthews and the Western Cemetery in Nassau, New Providence.

Burial practices in Nassau cemeteries reflect European and Christian influences in headstone design as well as in layout, but on San Salvador, graves are most often marked using local, natural materials until the late 20th century. Beginning in the 1970s, grave markers on San Salvador begin to mirror contemporary graves in Nassau, which have a style that is uniquely Bahamian in nature. These interments are typified by the presence of a plot marker and a headstone that are made from a local limestone concrete and painted white (Aranha 2008). Prior to the establishment of this more uniform "Bahamian" style, a variety of grave markers were used on San Salvador. These include the planting of individual *lingum vitae* trees, planting flowering trees or plants (sometimes surrounded by rock circles), erecting unadorned slabs of limestone as headstones, piling rocks over a grave, and stacking limestone cobbles and cementing them with a limestone plaster in a shape that resembles a sarcophagus (Figure 2). There are also instances of finished headstones made of wood or limestone, most of which bear no inscription. Some of these grave markers, such as rock piles, may have been used to mark the location of an interment, while also being a way to dispose of the rock removed during excavation. Each type of grave marker is at once deliberate in construction and distinct from the other types of grave markers used on the island.

While these cemeteries have elements that are similar to earlier graveyards and later rural, garden cemeteries, is not possible to determine exactly when they were established. References to the municipal cemeteries on San Salvador first appear in the British Commissioner's Records of the 1890s (Commissioners Records 1830s-1900). These records briefly mention the location and condition of cemeteries, and also discuss them as places that were well-established by the time they were being reported upon in these documents. Prior to emancipation there were no formal cemeteries, and interments took place on individual tracts of land as evidenced by the few marked

planter's graves on the island. The journal of Charles Farquharson reports that he gave his slaves two days off from work to attend a funeral for a slave at another plantation, suggesting that slaves had a certain degree of autonomy over the funeral rites of their community members (Farquharson 1957 [1831-32]). These two sources place the date of the establishment of formal cemeteries sometime after emancipation, but before the British Commissioner's Reports (1834-1890): a time on the island when population shifts were taking place and new communities were being established on the island (Burton 2006).

The graves themselves shed little light on the establishment of the cemeteries. The majority of the graves in these cemeteries are devoid of inscriptions, until the second half of the 20th century. No graves from North Victoria Hill, Sugarloaf or Farquharson's cemeteries have inscriptions from this earlier period, and only 7% of the graves in Cockburn Town and 16% of the graves in United Estates Cemetery contain inscriptions before 1950. The earliest of these are in Cockburn Town and date to 1892.

Cemeteries on San Salvador are still very active sites, with both natural elements and human activities shaping their nature and appearance. Most of these cemeteries have sandy soils and are very near the coastlines. These sediments shift easily and gravestones can move or become covered due to shifting sands. Cemeteries are also still being used actively as sites for funerals and ongoing commemoration, and regular efforts at maintaining these spaces, including picking up leaves and mowing grass, continually alter the landscape.

BURIAL PATTERNS ON SAN SALVADOR: LOCAL TRADITIONS AND COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS

Cemeteries on San Salvador share certain features, particularly the types of features that may have been dictated by outside authorities, such as the location of cemeteries and the construction of walls to contain them. Other shared features, such as the east/west orientation of the graves, are typical of Christian cemeteries world-

wide. Individual grave markers, however, vary in type and frequency among different cemeteries and this variation points to the different decisions people made about regarding the commemoration of community members in each island settlement. These deliberate choices in grave markers reflect social, cosmological, and at times functional aspects of funerary rituals and community life in the mid-19th and early 20th century when these new settlements were becoming established on the island (Burton 2006).

Cockburn Town Cemetery
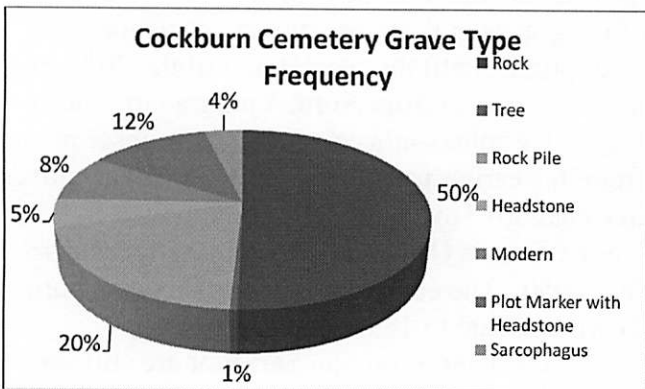
Figure 3. Grave Marker Type Frequencies for Cockburn Town Municipal Cemetery. N= 179

The cemetery in Cockburn Town is by far the largest on the island with 179 marked graves present within its walled boundaries. There are seven different types of grave markers found in this cemetery, with half of the graves being marked by an upright limestone slab resembling a headstone, but with unfinished surfaces and no inscriptions (Figures 2 and 3). This cemetery also has several inscribed headstones that date before 1950 (7% of the pre-1950 graves), which also share the types of headstone design and plot markers common in Nassau cemeteries at the time. This particular emphasis on headstones may be the result of Cockburn Town's role as the major port for the island during the later 19th and 20th centuries, and the presence of the Island Commissioner's Office in the town. The influence of and connection to Nassau during this period seems to

be reflected in the choices people were making about burial practices and grave marker design.
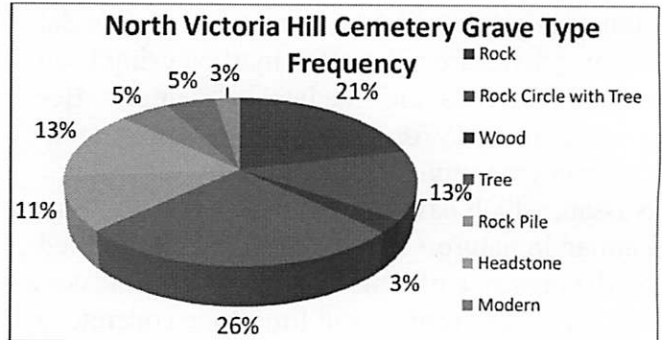
North Victoria Hill Cemetery

Figure 4. Grave Marker Type Frequencies for North Victoria Hill Cemetery. N=38.

The cemetery in the nearby community of North Victoria Hill is noticeably different from the cemetery in Cockburn Town. Only 38 marked graves are found in this relatively small cemetery, but nine different types of grave markers were recorded (Figure 4). None of these grave markers are inscribed, but six have glass and ceramic pieces on top of the graves. The high degree of diversity among such a small number of graves shows a variety of choices in burial practices, although the use of trees and plants is the dominant form of grave marking at 39%.

United Estates Cemetery

United Estates cemetery has 86 graves, the second largest number of interments in a cemetery on San Salvador. These graves fall into eight different categories of grave marker with trees and plot markers being the most common and together forming the majority of the markers in the cemetery (Figure 5). The United Estates cemetery has the highest percentage of pre-1950 inscribed grave markers on the island with 16% of the graves having some form of written inscription. Twelve of the graves also have intact or fragmentary glass or ceramic vessels in association with the grave markers.
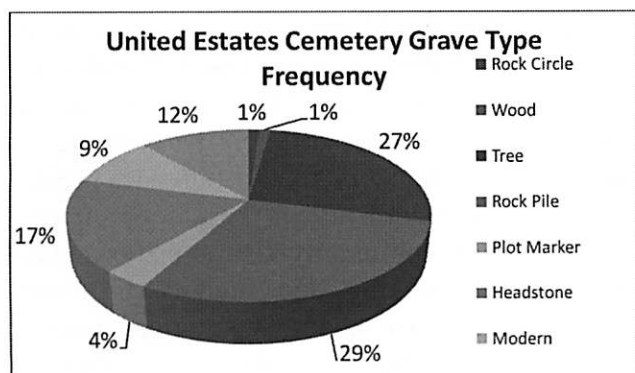
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Figure 5. Grave Marker Type Frequencies for United Estates Cemetery. N= 86.

Farquharson's Cemetery

There are 28 identified, marked graves in Farquharson's Cemetery, although there may have been many more marked graves in this cemetery at one time. Farquharson's Cemetery is located on the inland side of a coastal dune, and most of the grave markers have been washed down to the base of the sandy slope. Hurricanes have caused waves to wash sand up and over the dunes and the water and wind have caused most grave markers to break free from the sandy soil and tumble. It is likely that the sandy overburden hides additional grave markers from view. Only more substantial graves and plants have survived in situ. The markers that were visible fell into five types, and four graves had glass vessels on them and no grave markers had written inscriptions before 1950 (Figure 6).
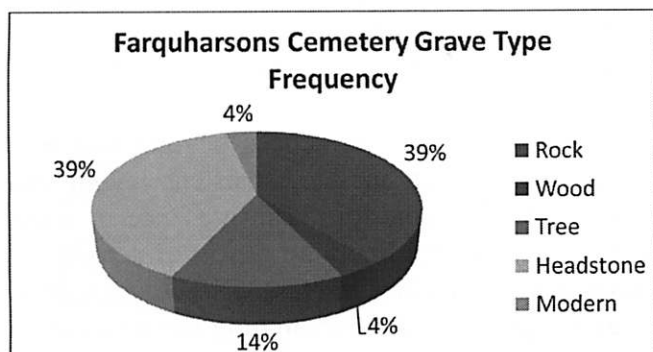

Figure 6. Grave Marker Type Frequency for Farquharson's Cemetery. N= 28

Sugarloaf Cemetery

Forty-eight marked graves were identified in the cemetery at Sugarloaf, and these graves fall into only four categories (Figure 7). Sugarloaf has the highest percentage of post-1950 graves of any cemetery, however, there are many areas in the cemetery that are devoid of grave markers that may be the locations of unmarked graves. Like Cockburn Town, the most common type of grave marker is limestone rock placed vertically like a headstone. None of the pre-1950 grave markers had inscriptions, and four graves have glass or ceramic vessels in association with a grave marker.
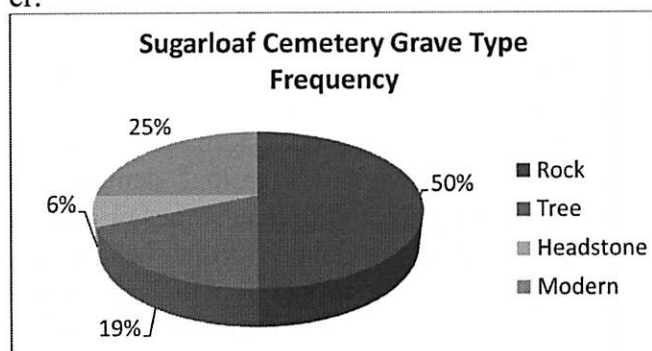

Figure 7. Grave Marker Type Frequency for Sugarloaf Cemetery. N= 48.

What Do These Distributions Mean?

Each of these cemeteries has a unique configuration of grave marker types and frequencies, which points to the activities of the local community. This distribution of grave marker types on the island also indicates the interconnectedness of these different settlements and that ideas, influences, and people were moving among them. Several types of graves: trees, rocks, and rock piles appear at cemeteries across the island, and making variation not an issue of presence/absence, but rather of the relative frequency of different grave marker types (figures 3-7). In these cases, it appears particular communities developed preferences for certain styles of grave markers that were not as popular in other communities on the island. These distributions further indicate, however, that certain types of interactions and influences were island-wide. For example, it could be possible that people with a particular family connection or a particular sense of heri-

tage chose a certain type of grave marker for their loved ones. As they moved among communities through marriage or other means, they would bring their particular preferences for grave styles with them. It may not be coincidental, for example, that a community such as United Estates that brought together the descendants of slaves from several different plantations shows a high degree of variability in grave marker types, while Farquharson's Cemetery, a cemetery associated with a settlement from the former Farquharson Estate, has such limited variation.

Other grave types are much more limited in distribution being found in only one or two cemeteries, suggesting a local practice that did not find favor in other communities on the island. The two cemeteries on the western side of the island, Cockburn Town and Sugarloaf, demonstrate a preference for graves with headstones or upright rock slabs that approximate formal headstones, suggesting a stronger connection to Nassau and beyond. Similarly, the above ground "Sarcophagus" style grave marker is not dissimilar from box or table tombs that were very popular in England and the United States in the later 18th century and which appear frequently in St. Matthews and the Western Cemetery as well as in the Exumas. While these grave markers have a significant presence in Cockburn Town, only one other example is found on the island, in the North Victoria Hill Cemetery.

LOCALITIES, COMMUNITIES, ISLANDS: MARKING IDENTITY ON THE LANDSCAPE

Burials on San Salvador from the late 19th to mid 20th centuries show significant variation among the five official cemeteries on the island. This variation suggests that individual communities were establishing unique localities around the island and were rooting those localities both literally and symbolically in the distinct burial practices that remain visible today in the form of grave markers. The decision of how to inter and commemorate community members seems to have been an important part of "place making" and shaping local community identity, and may reflect important aspects of family or group heritage

(Baxter and Marshall 2009). Historical documentation for San Salvador in the late 19th and early 20th centuries points to the different resources and opportunities present on different parts of the island, and suggests that cultural differences present in the material record reflect the unique circumstances of each community (Burton 2006). This type of place making and identity formation would have been critical at this particular juncture in the history of San Salvador as members of emancipated plantation communities moved around the island to explore different economic opportunities and establish new communities that reflected their own circumstances and values.

This demonstrable difference in local commemorative practice is paired with clear indicators of knowledge moving among various communities on the island. The presence of certain types of grave markers in all five cemeteries points to these interactions. Preferred or dominant forms of grave markers from one cemetery occurring in another in very low frequencies is also indicative of people and ideas moving among the nascent local communities of San Salvador. It is significant to note that during this same period when each community established its own unique patterns of marking graves that an island-wide form of vernacular architecture in house type becomes apparent in the archaeological and architectural records, showing a clear convergence of certain types of cultural knowledge and daily practice in these five communities (Baxter and Burton 2007). Only after 1950, with the advent of the "modern" Bahamian style headstones do grave markings show the same type of consistency island-wide.

Evidence for influences beyond San Salvador can be seen in the consistent layout and placement of cemeteries. The presence of walls and gates was very likely an aspect of cemeteries dictated by authorities in Nassau. The orientation of graves points to the overarching participation in Christian burial practices and belief systems. "Africanisms" or elements of African heritage in burial practices on San Salvador also appear to be present in these cemeteries. The first of these elements is the presence of glass and ceramic vessels being placed on graves (Turner 2009). It is

notable that four of the five cemeteries on San Salvador contain evidence for this practice having taken place in the past, with the only exception being the cemetery in Cockburn Town- the cemetery demonstrating the greatest influences from British and American burial practices.

A second aspect of these graves that may relate to African heritage is the types of grave markers used in the cemeteries. For example, the use of trees as burial markers has strong connections to Kongo belief systems that associate trees with the movement of spirits between the world of the living and the world of the dead and to Asante beliefs that trees are the resting places of spirits (Blier 1998, Thompson 1991).

Trees are not the most common form of grave marker on San Salvador, rather the use of rocks, either as upright slabs or in piles, is the most prevalent form of grave marker. The significance of rocks as grave markers is not the raw material (as they simply use the most abundant material available on the island) but rather that rocks, like trees and plants do not employ or even allow for a written inscription as a means of commemoration. Regardless of the particular style of European or American grave marker, all are designed to facilitate a written inscription, as grave visitation and inscription reading is an important part of commemorative practice. African burial traditions do not include written inscriptions, and instead emphasize commemoration through storytelling and speaking of the deceased as the primary way to keep a person "alive" in the community (Finnegan 1970, Scheub 1985). While impossible to prove, it is interesting that on an island with many literate people in its population in the mid-19ᵗʰ century, only 26 or slightly less than 7% of all graves before 1950 had inscriptions suggesting commemoration took place in non-written form (Burton 2006).

This investigation of historic burial practices on San Salvador, when considered in historical and archaeological contexts, points to the complexity of community formation in the historic past. Some forms of material culture move closer together suggesting aspects of identity are shared among all members of the island community. Other forms of material culture show

marked differences and suggest more local processes of community formation were also taking place. When studying the past on the many islands that comprise the archipelagic nation of the Bahamas, it is important to think on many scales- family, community, island, nation, and beyond to find the different influences that shaped the lives of island residents. Doing so will undoubtedly lead to a more rich and nuanced understanding

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