

## 'NYNE OR TEN OF THEM DYED' Searching for Calvert's colonists at Ferryland

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FOUNDED IN 1621 BY GEORGE CALVERT, THE 1ST LORD BALTIMORE, TODAY THE COLONY AT FERRYLAND IS WELL KNOWN TO THOSE LIVING IN NEWFOUNDLAND. IT WAS EDWARD WYNNE WHO TOOK THE FIRST 11 SETTLERS TO FERRYLAND TO BUILD THE INITIAL SETTLEMENT, AND HE WROTE BACK TO ENGLAND THAT THE WEATHER WAS MILD AND CROPS GREW WELL. WHEN LORD BALTIMORE ARRIVED WITH HIS FAMILY AND IRISH CATHOLIC SETTLERS IN 1628, HE WAS GREETED WITH A SITUATION HE WAS NOT EXPECTING: THE HARSH REALITY OF A NEWFOUNDLAND WINTER.

In a letter to Charles I, King of England, Calvert wrote "my howse hath been an hospital all this wynter, of 100. persons 50. sick at a tyme, my self being one and nyne or ten of them dyed."<sup>1</sup> He asked the King for land in a warmer climate, farther south in the British territories on the mainland, and shortly after moved himself and his family to what became Maryland.

This letter, in conjunction with the three gravestone fragments kept on display at the Colony of Avalon Visitor

Centre in Ferryland, remain the only physical evidence that archaeologists have of deaths at the settlement during the Calvert period (1621-1629). The gravestones themselves tell of an organized burial ground within the historic landscape at Ferryland, but were found smashed and out of context. With no indication that there were ever graves where the stones were found, the location of the burial ground remains a mystery. In order to understand where to look for the historic burial ground, we first had to understand what British settlers were doing in similar settlements during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the beginning of the colonial period in North America.

### The living and their dead

When Calvert founded the 'Colony of Avalon,' British society was in the midst of political and religious turmoil. The Protestant Reformation in mainland Europe reached British shores in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which precipitated King Henry VIII separating from the Catholic Church in Rome to create the Church of England. This was encouraged by anti-Roman sentiments that were already present in the country.<sup>2</sup> The Protestant Reformation in England resulted in changes to the fabric of churches and monastic communities throughout the countryside, by altering ceremonies, removing sculpture and images, and changing the way in which people approached death. The medieval Catholic Church has the reputation of being a 'cult of the dead.' Many of its ceremonies revolved around preparing individuals for a 'good death,' and ensuring their soul did not linger too long in purgatory after they had died.

While the newly founded Anglican Church's power was not dominant until the English Civil War in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, its effects on burial practices were profound and long lasting. One of the changes was the



abolishment of Purgatory, and with it the practice of ‘intercession’ or prayers said to help the soul pass through Purgatory quickly. Intercession was a fundamental part of the services in the medieval Catholic Church, with prayers being said during mass for loved ones’ souls. With this practice no longer allowed, the organization of the church and churchyard began to see changes. For some reformers (*i.e.*, Puritans), prayers no longer affected the dead in the afterlife; neither did the placement of the dead in consecrated grounds. Some believed that if being close to the altar would not spiritually benefit you, than why would a consecrated space around the church be any different? Conflicting ideals regarding the organization of burial spaces in the late 16<sup>th</sup>- and early 17<sup>th</sup>-century British Empire influenced the burial landscapes in colonial British settlements in North America.

Many people are familiar with the story of the colonial ‘Pilgrims’ arriving in Massachusetts and starting one of the earliest British colonial settlements in North America at Plymouth, in 1620. By the time Plymouth

was underway, Cupid’s Plantation had already been established for a decade in Newfoundland, and Jamestown, Virginia had been struggling on the coast farther south since 1607. By exploring early British colonial settlements, we are able to take a closer look at the relationship between the living and the dead in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, or more specifically between burial spaces, churches, and the settlements themselves.

The religious group of which they were primarily made up guided how settlements established their burial grounds. While settlers in Plymouth were primarily Puritan and did not establish a church beside their first burial site, settlers at Jamestown were Anglican, and there we can see a central church structure within the early years and more traditional burials inside the nave of the church. But what about Cupids? Or the 1621 colony of Ferryland? It’s well known that for a time, both Catholics and Anglican practitioners resided at Ferryland, but that no church structure was built during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century at either Cupids or Ferryland.



### **The comfort of *memento mori***

A survey of 43 settlements of similar historic background and age to Ferryland reveals that the majority did not have their burial ground beside an established church (though churches were often added years later to establish Anglican control over Puritan spaces). This was likely because many early settlements in what are now Connecticut and Massachusetts were initially settled by primarily Puritan groups, and their burial grounds were established as municipal spaces which were accessible to everyone and devoid of a holy presence.<sup>3</sup> What does this tell us about early 17<sup>th</sup>-century settlements in Newfoundland? It suggests that there was a break in tradition, and that colonial settlements were able to re-invent their burial landscape without the confines of an existent model or earlier British settlement to guide them.

My survey included an additional 20 settlements from Newfoundland that likely date from before the year 1700, but no hard evidence could be located to indicate

that the burial grounds had seen continuous use. It also showed that early settlements on the Avalon Peninsula did not, for the most part, establish burial grounds near a church structure. This may have more to do with the lack of established clergy members on the island until the 1800s, but it is still interesting to consider, as the colony of Ferryland did have Anglican and Catholic clergy members with them and still did not establish a church separate from other public spaces.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this survey, a search was mounted to locate the burial ground of those first settlers who died in 1628. An archaeological excavation, led by the author as part of her Master's research, was conducted over the summers of 2016 and 2017. The statistical data shed light on the most likely (*i.e.* the most common) places within similar settlements to Ferryland, and helped us narrow down the excavation to locations with a higher probability of containing burials. Outside the walls of a fortified settlement, the most likely locations were to the east and potentially the south,

and the most likely location overall was the central spaces within the settlement. Rather than digging up the entire Downs, this was a strategic approach. It should be said that this excavation was not looking to exhume human remains if graves were uncovered, but rather to simply identify grave shafts through indicators in the soil, and record their location within the wider landscape of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century settlement.

Most of the areas at Ferryland explored throughout this project were very close to the houses and other occupational spaces at the site. Visitors commonly asked why we were excavating so close to the 'living' area: why would they want to bury the dead so close to home? To put it simply, physically separating death and the dead from the living is a fairly recent idea, and historically it was much more common, and even preferred, to bury people in a central location. This might be for ease of access for the funeral or for visitors down the line, but in some cases was also to act as a reminder, a *memento mori*, that death comes for everyone. To the people of medieval and post-medieval Britain, this was not a morbid concept, but a comfort, and we see similar practices in colonial British settlements in North America.

The 2016 excavation was preceded by a ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey over four high potential areas outside of the walls of the colony itself. The early 17<sup>th</sup>-century settlement at Ferryland was once surrounded by a large ditch and wooden palisade to protect it from attack, and while the statistical survey did not indicate whether inside or outside of the walls would be a more likely location for the burial ground (indeed, they were split 50/50), the excavation began with exterior locations since the buildings within the walled settlement were crowded together. The GPR survey was meant to look below the surface for indications that nearly 400 years ago the ground had been excavated for a burial. These indications would then assist in deciding where to dig the first trenches.

Archaeologically speaking, subsoil is the sterile layer of sediment below the surface that contains no artifacts or other evidence of human occupation. On the Avalon Peninsula, this layer is comprised of 'glacial till,' a layer that was deposited on the surface as the glaciers melted and retreated from the landform.<sup>5</sup>

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Glacial till is characterised by angular rocks of different sizes, mixed sediments, and is often of a compact nature. After the glaciers had melted, sediment began to build up again, and because humans did not occupy the area while it was buried in ice, we see evidence of human occupation in the soil layers which post-date the last Ice Age.

The subsoil at Ferryland is roughly 40-60cm below surface on average, much too shallow to have been an adequate grave for the average person. Therefore, had the graves been dug deeper into the underlying subsoil, even if the surface had been disturbed and grave markers lost since the 1600s, the soil would show evidence of disturbance in the subsoil layer. Unfortunately, GPR does not work well in areas that are very wet, sloped, or rocky. Ferryland is all of those things. As a result, most of the potential anomalies that the GPR picked up were simply rocks below surface.

### Crushed pipes and gravestone fragments

In 2016 we dug trenches through areas which within the last 300 years had been used as gardens, so instead of pristine soil layers we were met with mixed garden soils with artifacts ranging from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Guided by the GPR data, trenches measuring 1m wide and 2-4m in length were carefully excavated using shovels and trowels running north/south as to intersect graves that would likely have been dug east/west in the typical Christian tradition. Volunteers were taught how to identify artifacts from the surrounding rocks, and keep an eye out for changes in the texture, consistency, colour, and sound of the sediment as the trenches were dug down to subsoil.

Several of the trenches contained interesting surprises. One particular 5m trench was opened due to elongated anomalies present in the GPR data at a depth that could indicate human burials. After several days we had passed the point where we expected to encounter subsoil, but instead were met with an intact soil layer with a late 17<sup>th</sup>-century clay tobacco pipe crushed on top of the layer in 18 pieces. This was important, and suggested that nothing below that point had been disturbed by modern machinery or structures. To the north end of the trench, thin layers of a black, rich soil were exposed and were identified by site archeologist Dr Barry Gaulton as



decomposed sod. This was exciting news, as the earthen rampart that surrounded the 1621 settlement had been built up of earth and sods taken from the digging of the defensive ditch that also ringed the town. The location of the southern portion of the ditch had not been previously identified, but with the discovery of the stacked sods, it seemed that we had located a portion of the ditch and rampart fortification. Subsoil wasn't reached until 1m below the modern surface, solidifying the ditch theory. This was important for the search for the burial ground as well, as the 2016 fieldwork was meant to look outside of the defensive structure, and now we knew the southern boundary of the settlement.

While the 2016 excavations did not reveal the location of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century burial ground, it allowed a reassessment of the statistical survey as well as the historical and archaeological evidence. It is known that Sir David Kirke, who took over the settlement at Ferryland in 1638 after George Calvert abandoned the area, was unhappy that some of the earlier residents of

the colony had been Roman Catholic. While Calvert dreamed of creating the first religiously tolerant colony in North America, Kirke spoke openly against Catholicism.<sup>6</sup> With that in mind, we assumed that Kirke would likely not have buried his dead in the same space as Calvert's settlers, as he wouldn't have wanted to associate with a Catholic burial space. Indeed, it may have been Kirke and his people who smashed the gravestone fragments in the first place in order to remove the presence of other faiths on the landscape. Therefore the earliest burial ground would not have needed to be so large as to hold individuals from the whole of the 1600s, but rather around 10-20 individuals. This small number meant that locations within the walls of the settlement would have been large enough for the burial ground. With this in mind, we planned the 2017 excavation.

### **Digging for answers**

The July 2017 excavation was carried out with a team of volunteers from Canada, the USA, and Japan. Not

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only was digging graves inside the walls of the settlement more logical in terms of ease of transport for the 17<sup>th</sup>-century settlers, but the statistical analysis suggested that overall, 17<sup>th</sup>-century colonial burial grounds were more likely to be in the relative centre of town than on the outskirts. The first trench opened was situated to the south of the brewhouse/bake house, constructed in the early 1620s, and later remodelled by Kirke. The trench contained undisturbed soil layers dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, presenting the first large assemblage of in-situ artifacts that the excavation had uncovered. Among these objects were clay pipes from the early 1600s and fragments of clay bread ovens which had been part of the original design of the brewhouse/bakehouse.

Further trenches were opened directly north of the brew house in an open area near where the gravestone fragments had been recovered. There was no archaeological evidence to indicate that a building stood in the area during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which made it a viable option for a burial space within the community. There is a history of using the 'town green' in colonial settlements as a burial ground, a notable example of which is New Haven, Connecticut, and if this space at Ferryland was equally as unoccupied by the living ... why not the dead?

Why not indeed. After opening two trenches across the area, no indication could be found that this area was used as a burial ground in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While in the 1990s the gravestone fragments were found very close to this space, it would appear that they were deposited in that area by human or elemental forces other than simply breaking and resting where they'd fallen.<sup>7</sup>

While a lot of new information about the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century settlement was uncovered during those four weeks, including details on the construction of the earthwork defensive structure called the 'bastion,' the location of the burial ground remains elusive. Does that mean that the excavation was unsuccessful? Definitely not! Archaeology is inherently a journey to create knowledge, and sometimes there are no definitive answers. Negative results are still data, however, and you can learn about something even if it is no longer there. In addition to all the new aspects of Ferryland

that were revealed throughout the cumulative 10-week excavation, a lot of information was learned about the burial ground at Ferryland.

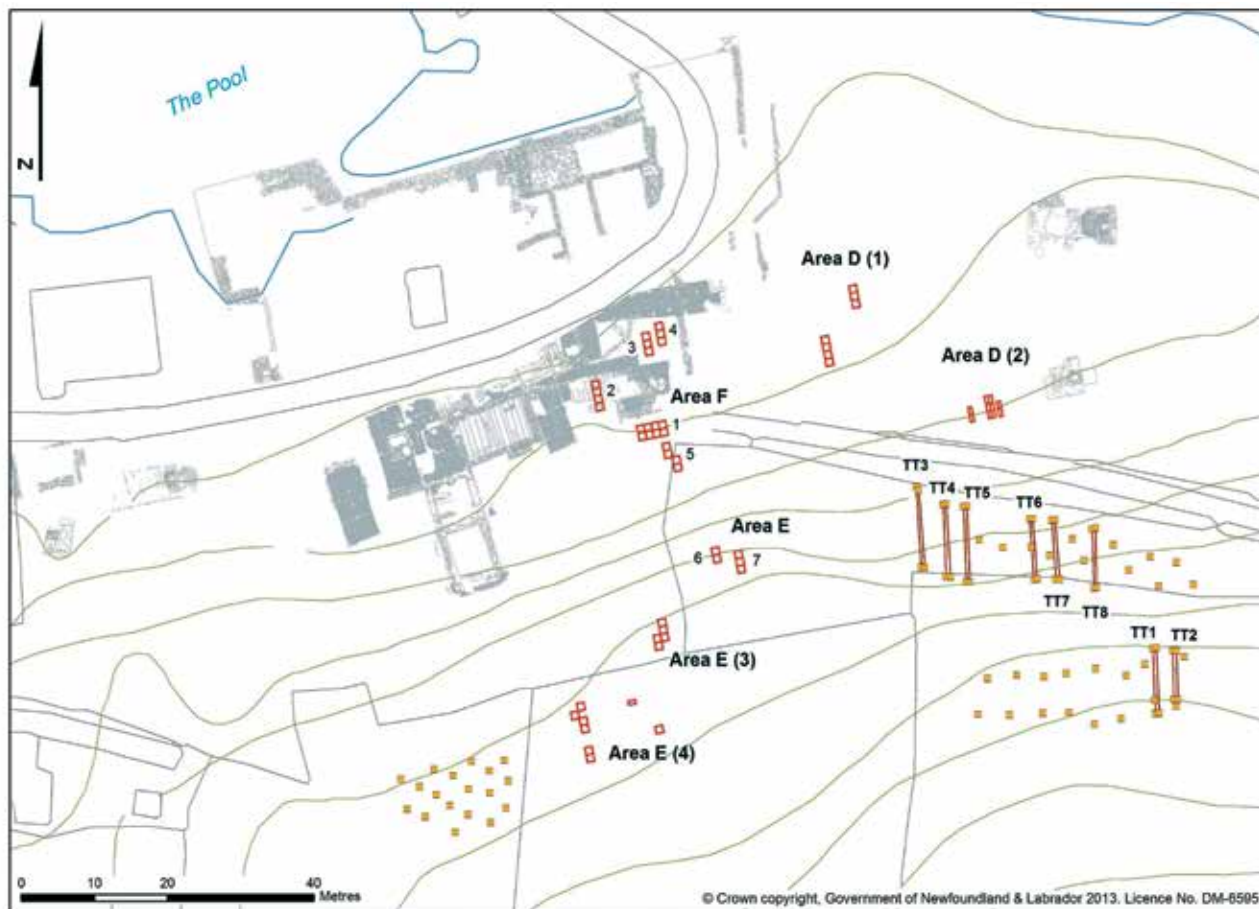
The first, and most crucial aspect of the study was learning where the burials *aren't*. Until this project, a systematic attempt to locate the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century burials at Ferryland had not been undertaken, and

so even confirming where the burials are not located is very useful for future archaeological research. Many of the areas excavated during the course of this project had never been explored archaeologically, and thus all information gained from a trench, for example, that had no soil stains or artifacts still provided useful data on how that space was or wasn't used during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The second intent of this excavation was to test the data provided by the statistical analysis. While the comparison provided information on the most popular locations of colonial period burial grounds, it is not possible to quantify human behavior in such a way that we can predict exactly what a specific group of people did. While the model suggests that the majority of settlements surveyed placed their burial grounds away from churches in the centre of a town, or on an elevated landform, that does not mean that Calvert and his settlers were aware of the popular burial trends that were being established along the coast of New England.

The people at Ferryland did not appear to have placed their dead in the most statistically likely places, as compared to other contemporaneous settlements. Burials were not in the open spaces in the centre of town, or to the east of the settlement on the banks of the hill and outside of the palisade. This indicates that perhaps the burial ground's location was in the minority of results provided by the statistical analysis. If the burials can be located in a future field season, this would serve to add additional data to what we as archaeologists understand about burial landscape design and use in the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century colonial period in British North America.

After all that, where could the burials at Ferryland be? One option is that they were simply placed somewhere that we did not yet have a chance to investigate. Alternatively, it is possible that the graves no longer exist. The soil in the area is acidic, meaning organic material



breaks down quickly. After nearly 400 years, it is likely that there is nothing left of the early colonists. If they were buried without coffins, the decomposition would have taken place even quicker, and by the time 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century houses were being constructed in the area the graves could have been dug through without them being recognized. In the same stream, much of the Downs has been farmed for hundreds of years, and subsequent ploughing over shallow graves would easily remove any evidence of grave shafts long after their inhabitants had returned to the earth.

Another possibility is that the burials were located to the northeast of the settlement, in an area that is less likely based on comparison with other settlements, and currently the victim of heavy and ongoing coastal erosion. It is impossible to know exactly how much of the land has been eroded since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but if the graves were placed along the coastline there is a very high chance that they no longer exist.

While the 2016 /2017 excavations did not locate the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century burial ground, it did give

archaeologists insight into an aspect of Ferryland's history that had previously not been explored. Furthermore, the excavation added to the body of knowledge about the occupation and how people used the space available to them. Whether the graves have since eroded into the ocean, were disturbed years ago by ploughs or buildings, or are still lying below the surface somewhere near the settlement, will be a question for future archaeologists to tackle. By comparing the organization of this site to other British settlements in North America during the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, we've gained a better understanding of how Ferryland and its burial landscape fits into the early colonial world. **NQ**

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