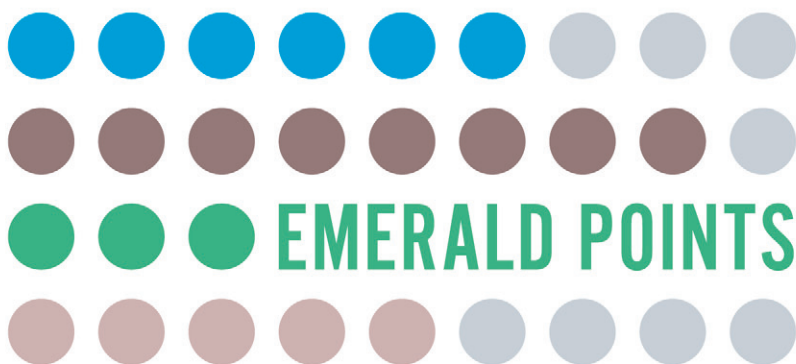


# BURIAL AND DEATH IN COLONIAL NORTH AMERICA

Exploring Interment Practices and Landscapes  
in 17th-Century British Settlements

Robyn S. Lacy



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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists confront death on a regular basis. There is nothing abstract about this statement; it is merely a truth that comes in tandem with a profession that works with the dead and the landscapes, buildings and objects that were left behind. Sometimes archaeologists come face to face with individuals who died centuries ago, and that connection to the dead becomes much more direct. Archaeologists facilitate discussions of mortality, death and burial, whether it be through museum displays, writing, online discussion, lectures or tours of active archaeological sites. It is important for the field to engage with the topic, as a collective of professionals who can offer a platform for discussion with the public. It is valuable for our understanding of human history and of relationships within societies between the living and the dead to understand the death and burial practices of a group of people. Through this, we are able to construct a better picture both of a society's general and more specific relationships with mortality, how they felt about the bodies of their dead, interactions with funeral practices and how they dealt with the grieving process. An aspect of the funeral and burial practices

in any community is where the dead are actually buried with relation to the living, what or which landscape is oriented for the dead as well as the living, within the community of the living. A little-known aspect of death and burial during the North American colonial period is the early seventeenth-century practices from the British Empire who founded settlements along the east coast of the continent. This is due to the lack of gravestones and often of written documentation to highlight those early uses of a space as a colonial burial ground. This book seeks to shed light on those spaces, how they were used and what they meant to their communities.

This book aims to achieve two primary goals: to look critically at seventeenth-century burial landscapes and their organization at North American settlements and to reflect on the settler relationship with mortality. Reflections of mortality and settlers' relationships with their dead are represented in the burial spaces they left behind in the seventeenth century, and in the organization of these spaces that were influenced by sociopolitical, religious and geographic factors. Turmoil in the British Isles between the beginning of the Protestant Revolution in the mid-sixteenth century through the English Civil War in the mid-seventeenth century shaped not only the religious and political landscape of much of the British Isles but also affected the burial landscape of colonial North America. Changes to funerary and burial practices from the early-mid sixteenth century were caused by disagreements between the Catholic Church and the newly ordained Protestant Church of England, whose attempts to remove aspects of medieval Christianity altered church practices and burial rites. The effects of the Reformation on burial practices in the British Isles will be discussed further in Chapter 2. Settlers who died in North America during the seventeenth century did not have the 'infrastructure' for burials found in the British Isles or the patterns of previous burials or structures to dictate where the

dead could be buried, but they did have the influence of both old and new burial traditions to guide them.

This book will provide further understanding of the choices and elements that affected the development of the burial grounds and interments within the landscape of British colonial settlements in seventeenth-century eastern North America. While this period is widely studied by archaeologists, historians and genealogists alike, a large-scale study of death and dying in this period which explores aspects of the burial practices, organization and morbid spaces of colonial British settlements had yet to be compiled. The following chapters explore and clarify seventeenth-century burial practices in terms of funerals and burial practices, and burial ground organization by examining both the orientation of graves within these sites and the wider landscape of burial grounds within their associated settlements. Within these burial sites, gravestone-carving traditions as they developed will be explored, as well as folk traditions transferred from the British Isles west to North America.

The data collected during this project provides a unique spatial database for burial ground organization at a regional, coastal and international level. By comparing the results of the frequency analysis, these data provide evidence of trends in burial locations. This information can then be applied to understand the burial practices of newly installed settler communities and also aid in locating seventeenth-century burial grounds that exist in the historic record but of which no clear physical evidence remains.

## RESEARCH AREA AND BACKGROUND

It is important to recognize that the settlements explored as part of this research were established on the traditional lands of numerous Indigenous groups in what is now the United

States and Canada. This includes the territory of Kecoughtan and Kiskiack in Virginia, Piscataway in Maryland, Tunxis, Sicoags, Wangunks, Quinnipiac, Wappinger, Paugussett, Hammonasset, Mohegan and Western Nehântick in Connecticut, Massechusett, Naumkeag, Wampanoag, Agawam and Wabanaki Confederacy in Massachusetts, Wampanoag in Rhode Island, Pennacook, Wabanaki Confederacy, Pentucket and Abenaki in New Hampshire, Wabanaki Confederacy, Aucisco, Abenaki and Arosaguntacook in Maine and the traditional territory of the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq peoples on the east coast of the island of Newfoundland (Native Land, 2020). While historical documents often mention that the land was lawfully traded for, this was often not the case, and in the instance of sites like Jamestown, Virginia (Kelso, 2006), and Old Town Newbury (First Parish of Newbury, 2016), the settlers would face attacks for years, the results of imposing themselves on these lands. The author acknowledges the historical and ongoing atrocities to Indigenous peoples caused by colonialism in the United States of America and Canada. This research recognizes that historic settler burial grounds were established as the direct result of colonialism on these traditional territories and represent an imposed ownership of land by said settlers.

This research examined sites dating between 1607 and the 1690s, spanning the Atlantic coast from Virginia to Maine including the island of Newfoundland, and uses a case study of the remote, coastal settlement at Ferryland, Newfoundland. All 60 of the sites identified and studied were founded by people from the British Isles: English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish. Specifically, this study focused on settlements originally founded by British and Irish settlers during the seventeenth century. This does not include settlements that were originally founded by settlers from mainland Europe and later taken over by the British, i.e., New York City, originally Nieuw

Amsterdam (New Amsterdam), founded by the Dutch around 1609 and captured by the British in the 1660s. Dutch, French, Spanish and other settler nationalities were present on the continent throughout the early colonial period of the seventeenth century though are beyond the scope of this research. An expanded study of this nature which includes sites founded by these other nationalities besides British and Irish would benefit future research. Only sites founded by groups from the British Isles were included in this study due to the wide scope of their settlements as well as their similar political and social background to British settlement in Newfoundland. The author intends to conduct such a study in the future.

Newfoundland has long been considered a land rich in fish and timber and home to numerous bands of Indigenous peoples (Tuck, 1976). European exploration to the region first occurred around 1000 AD with the short-lived Norse settlement at L'Anse Aux Meadows. Permanent European settlement did not occur until 1610 with the founding of Cupids by John Guy under the sponsorship of the London & Bristol Company (otherwise known as the Newfoundland Company), followed shortly thereafter by Sir George Calvert at Ferryland (Cell, 1969, 1982). The background of settlement in Newfoundland will be discussed in Chapter 5, providing insight into the famously poor weather, high winds, long winters and rocky terrain, endured by those early settlers who arrived unprepared and unaware of their new environment.

Ferryland is the fourth oldest permanently occupied British settlement in North America and the second in Newfoundland. Founded in 1621 by Sir George Calvert, the First Lord Baltimore, Ferryland, is a National Historic Site of Canada and houses a massive collection of archaeological material in a museum near the site. Visitors can observe archaeological excavations each summer and see conservation taking place in the onsite lab. It is a unique site due to the early attempts at

religious tolerance brought across the Atlantic by Calvert, and the use of stone as the primary building material when most settlements of the period were of wood construction, and the subsequent level of preservation due to this material choice.

Ferryland, also briefly known as the ‘Colony of Avalon’ by Calvert, was chosen as the main subject of this research due to the lack of identified seventeenth-century burials present at the site. Located on the southeast coast of the Avalon Peninsula, on the far east coast of the island of Newfoundland, the town is an hour’s drive south of the capital city of St. John’s and is still considered relatively remote. Buffeted by high winds and occasionally featured in the media when colossal icebergs drift by, the town has been shaped over the centuries by hard work and survival.<sup>1</sup> The ‘Colony of Avalon’ existed under several different governors throughout the seventeenth century, but despite reference to a burial site in the historical record, the location of said burials has not been identified.

This project was the first strategic attempt to find the burial site at Ferryland associated with the early occupational period (1620s) at the site. This was accomplished by investigating burial grounds and organizations in settlements of similar age, religious background, settler nationality and geographic placement to Ferryland, in doing so narrowing down the multitude of unexcavated areas at the site, to locations with a higher probability for burial ground location. These sites were then ground truthed, first through ground-penetrating radar survey, then followed by archaeological excavation in order to look for evidence of grave shafts in the subsurface. The results of these excavations will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5 of this book. Although the 1620s burial ground at Ferryland has not been identified at the time of writing, the fieldwork

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1 The iceberg has been immortalized on Stéphane Huot’s 2019 design for Canada Post’s international stamps, for the ‘From Far and Wide’ series.

undertaken was the first comprehensive attempt to locate those early burials at the site, and the excavations expanded the understanding of the burial landscape as well as the site as a whole.

## LITERARY REVIEW

### Burial Landscapes

A burial as a space comprises the burial itself, the burial ground as a site and the burial landscape, i.e., the wider context of the so-called morbid space within its community. The creation of a burial landscape is influenced by the surrounding geography, social relationships with the dead, politics, religion, and personal preference of the individual's friends and family, as well as the deceased's own perimortem wishes. Many scholars have incorporated studies of burial grounds as sites, as the focus of their work as historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. The study of landscapes as an aspect of archaeology, and burial landscapes in particular, comes with the understanding that there is no set definition as to what 'landscape' is or what it should mean between one group of people to the next (Anshuetz, Wilshusen, & Scheick, 2001, p. 158). The burial landscapes discussed in this research encompass the physical spaces that house the graves, elements which make up the spaces that are not graves (e.g., Landscaping, decorations, tokens left on graves), the space's relationship with other aspects of the community and its living populations and activities, movements and emotions that were enacted within or associated with it. While the meaning of landscape indicates what one can see within the natural environment, a landscape should perhaps be thought of as the outcome of cultural interaction.



This separates the landscape from the environment (Bain, 2010). Ingold (1993) suggests that a landscape can only exist to those who have known and lived within that specific environment at any given point of time. Upon that reasoning, while we can explore the cultural impact of the burial landscape, we will never be able to experience or understand the space in the way that people in the seventeenth century did. This only leads to more questions about how a community, historically, would have experienced and interacted with their burial spaces. When considering the evolution of a burial landscape, a space which inspires certain behaviours and emotion from individuals, acknowledging these affects is useful in emphasizing the need to explore cultural background and individuality when examining land organization (Anschutz et al., 2001).

Today, burial grounds and cemeteries are often viewed with fear, reverence for the historic dead or curiosity as a tangible link to a community's past. Yalom's *The American Resting Place* (2008) provides a look at the evolution of burial practices in the United States in two forms: a photo essay and summary of burial traditions cross major regions of the country. In her opening chapters, Yalom discusses the Native American burial practices and recognizes European settler impact on the communities who practiced them. Following this section, the discussion includes, but is not limited to, the gravestones of New England and discusses death in the South, burial grounds as real estate and landscape and the American west. Crucial to this book are the discussions of the burial ground as a property, as a feature within a community, and well as the history of 'marking the grave', which provide an overview on the topic as well as an excellent point of reference to refer interested parties to. Discussing the burial landscape as an aspect of the community allows us to consider how people in the seventeenth century may have interacted with